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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

10. TRAIN YOUR ARROW UPON MY GOD, APOSTATE! (ACT 2)



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Claiomh pointed at Salua,
who was covered in wounds.

*“You’re kind of cute with
Leki on your head.”*

“You put him up there!”

He suddenly realized Azalie was looking down at him, an amused expression on her face.



Just then,
the Sword of
Baldanders
pierced through
the Death
Instructor's
thick chest!

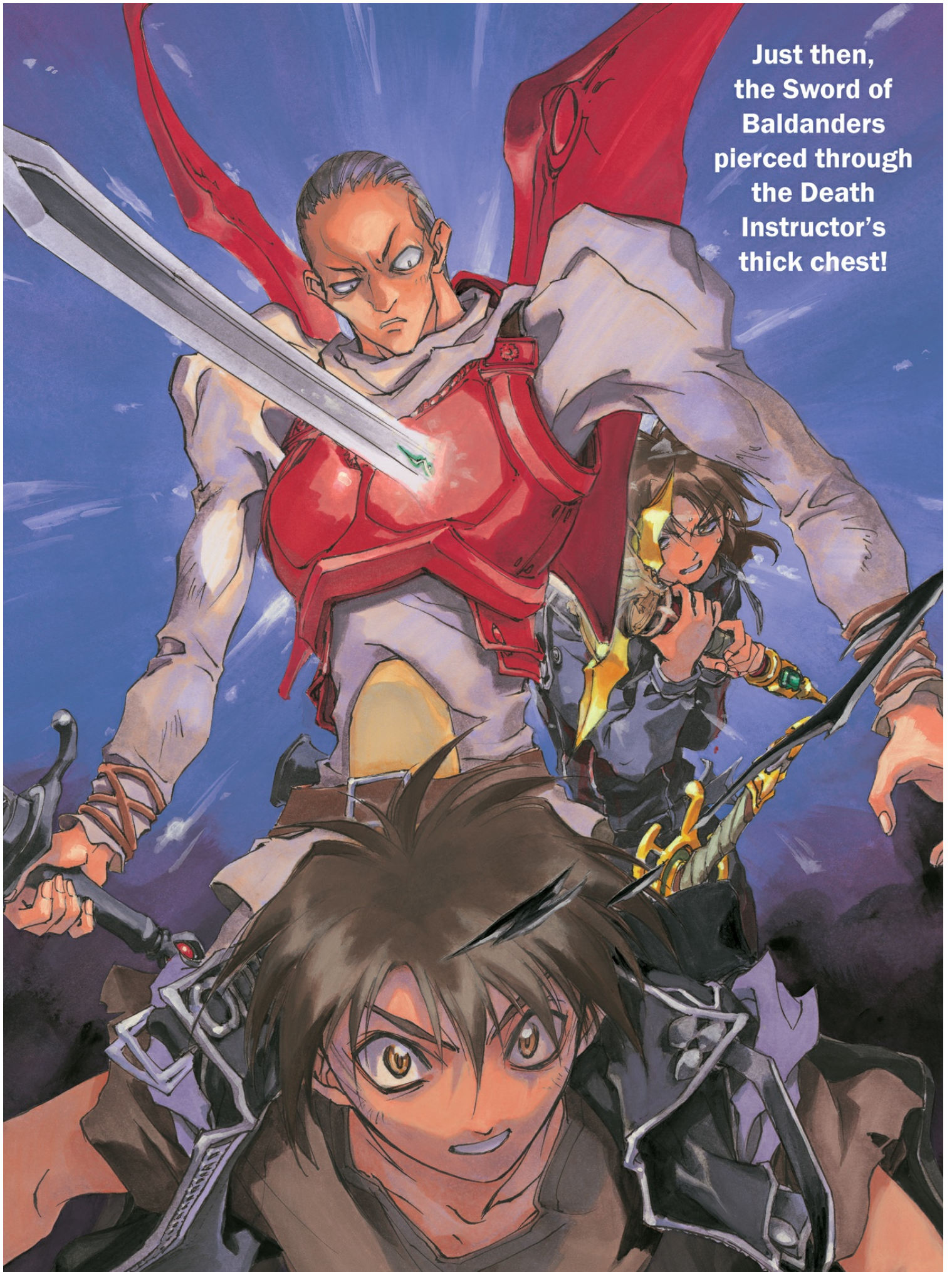


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Chapter VII: Krylancelo

...Who's this?

You know him, don't you? He's Krylancelo...

It only took an instant.

It really only took him an instant to drown. The impact when he hit the black, freezing water paralyzed him. He sank, unable to even struggle. He couldn't see anything in the water, so he wasn't even able to tell what state he was in. All he really knew was that somewhere above him—not that he was even sure which direction that was—a lid of black water had closed over him.

For now, I think he's the only one who can change classes... Fina Tram wants...

I don't think there's really any point in being stubborn right now...

If you're swallowed up by a truly massive amount of water, struggling becomes rather pointless. And Orphen couldn't move a finger right now anyway. As he sunk, all he could do was calmly try his best to understand... Or maybe not understand, but accept... or hope.

His senses dulled. A heavy sense of drowsiness threatened to overwhelm him. But instead of fighting it, he closed his eyes and embraced it fiercely—*Let me sleep.*

I know who you are...

Just let me sleep!

Why don't you entrust it to him? If you don't intend to entrust it to anyone, I have no more use for you...

The impact, the cold, the weightlessness within the water, his understanding, his acceptance, his hope.

His screams contained all of these.



Quo Vadis Pater stared at her.

His huge, rugged body was protected by ancient armor, and he held a lump of black metal in his hand. White smoke poured from the void of the barrel—the weapon was a gun. Quo held it in his left hand and pointed it at her like it was a toy. There was no emotion in his eyes, other than stifled rage. It was like how you couldn't see the bullet inside the gun barrel.

Azalie stared back at him silently.

Even her mind was silent. Silently, she felt her whole body tense. The muscles in her chest tightened and her shoulders shook. Her hand tightened on the grip of the Sword of Baldanders.

The grand hall they stood in had been thoroughly destroyed by her sorcery. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, and... the door separating them from the "Poet's Chamber." She had destroyed all of them. Atop the pillars she'd summoned from the floor by "transforming" it with her sword, the priest soldiers still cowered, powerless. And it was clear to her that they were not cowering from the height of the pillars, though they *were* several meters up in the air. What the priest soldiers feared was the sight beyond the door to the Poet's Chamber she'd opened...

A subterranean lake, its black water stretching infinitely out. It should have been impossible for her to see from where she was, but she felt like she could spot a single ripple on its surface. One ripple on the quiet surface of the water, from when her brother had fallen into the dark lake. From when the lake swallowed him up...

And far off in the distance, right around the middle of the lake, above it, was a

woman in a green robe, suspended in the air. Her neck gripped tight in a hand that extended out from the darkness, the woman hung, limbs limp at her side, her beauty clear to see even from a distance. As if there were a slight wind blowing above the lake, the woman's long green hair swayed around her. The hand gripping her neck was stone-still. It merely held her as if she were a bouquet of flowers. And the woman's neck was clearly broken.

"...Goddess..." The word, uttered in a daze, broke the silence. It hadn't come from Azalie. Feeling unreasonably shocked by this, Azalie turned toward the one who'd spoken. It was the blonde girl, on the floor by the wall. She was staring blankly out at the lake, the baby deep dragon on her lap.

The word she'd muttered had only been a repetition of what Quo Vadis Pater had said seconds before.

The words the Death Instructor called Quo had fearfully uttered when he'd looked at the suspended woman: "goddess," "sin."

Forgive this sin.

It had been mere seconds since she'd heard those words. And in those seconds...

Azalie was aware of the twitching in her cheeks. She could hear the grinding of her teeth. She dropped the sword and screamed a curse at Quo.

"You killed him... didn't you?!" She couldn't even think at the time about how stupid those words sounded.

Quo took a step toward her, face devoid of expression. She could see the wings of light once again extending out around the Death Instructor with the crimson armor.

But she didn't care.

She dropped down low and thrust both hands out. Composing the greatest spell she could in the shortest amount of time she was capable of, she screamed, "Light!"

Light burst forth from her and converged on Quo.

She fired her sorcery with as much force as she could muster, enduring the

backlash against her own body. The force ripped at her arms and abdomen. She could see Quo effortlessly manipulating the wings of his armor to block her attack. Still, she focused on releasing as much of her strength as she could. An explosion rocked the cathedral.

The light vanished, though the heat around Quo remained. Flames whirled around him like a heat haze.

Azalie picked up the sword at her feet, trying to slow her quickened breathing. The glyphs on the sword's blade shone with a white light in response to her will. She shoved the sword into the floor with no hesitation and shouted, "Sink!"

The Celestial-forged sword obeyed her order and melted into the floor as if sinking into water. The Sword of Baldanders was swallowed up by the floor in no time at all.

She looked up. The blaze still surrounded Quo. He shouldn't be able to emerge from those wings as long as the heat flared around him. He hadn't earlier, at least. At the same time, as long as his wings were closed around him, her sorcery would have no effect against him.

As long as he's wearing that armor, I can't beat him, Azalie was forced to admit.

She took a small black box out from a pocket. It was shaped almost like a jewelry box, though it wasn't likely to be mistaken for one due to its lack of ornamentation. She slid her fingers over the surface of the box as she watched the immobile Quo, tracing the glyphs required to activate it.

I couldn't use this Celestial teleportation device to infiltrate the Cathedral... As she drew the complex glyphs on it, the box gradually increased in weight. She had to draw more glyphs the farther she wanted to move, but a distance of 100 kilometers would make the device too heavy for her to hold. Of course, if a Celestial were using it, they probably wouldn't need to hold it in their hand.

Once the box was a certain weight, Azalie stopped drawing. *But... I might be able to escape outside...*

Just then—she felt a soundless wind. Azalie leapt back, alarm bells going off in

her head.

Quo was flapping his wings. The heat holding him in place was gone.

Azalie clucked her tongue audibly. *That was fast... It doesn't just defend, it's able to neutralize sorcery to a degree too?!*

Starting to panic, she let loose another spell. "Spirits!"

Simultaneously feeling a chill that stood her hair on end and a burning ecstasy, she released a spell that she would normally never use in battle. Beyond her thrust-out hand, a huge ball of light—easily three meters in diameter—was taking form. The light then vanished and reappeared in an instant, bursting in Quo's face.

The searing light created a rumble that was not quite an explosion, that shook Azalie's eardrums. It pressed hard at Quo, but his wings resisted its might with equal strength.

"He can even block a ball of pseudo-lightning that moves at the speed of light..." Unlike a fireball that simply shoots out from a caster, a ball of lightning that appears and then moves according to the caster's will is something human sorcery should not be able to defend against. Since Quo's armor was able to block that, it must have had an automatic defensive reaction built into it. One of her trump cards blocked, Azalie groaned out loud. However...

The wings seemed only just able to defend against the light, and hadn't dispelled it. Which meant she'd probably bought some time.

Azalie turned around and dashed. Just behind her was her little brother's apprentice—she thought he'd called him Majic. He was unconscious and unlikely to wake up anytime soon after the extensive healing his wounds had required. Azalie shouldered the surprisingly light boy and glanced back at Quo. He was still engaged in a contest of strength with the ball of light.

Making up her mind, she took off again. She passed by Quo and headed for the limp young man on the ground near him—this one was familiar to her, though she couldn't for the life of her remember his name. He was also unconscious, wounded in several places. It was possible that Quo had said his name several times right in front of her, but she just couldn't remember it. Not

that that mattered at the moment.

She looked up. Setting Majic down next to the man, she shouted impatiently, “Claiomh!” She didn’t know if anyone had told her this girl’s name, but for some reason, this one, she remembered.

The girl was still sitting by the wall, face blank, as if she hadn’t gotten a grasp on the situation yet.

Azalie raised her voice at the girl. “Get over here!”

She looked at Quo. The light was still there. She looked back at Claiomh. The girl still wasn’t moving.

“Hurry up! Kryla— Uhh, Orphen’s really gonna die!” she shouted, just trying to come up with something to get her to move.

It seemed to work, in any case. She saw Claiomh shiver and then stand up. She almost dropped the baby dragon but held him tight to her and started to run toward Azalie.

When the girl reached her, Azalie pressed the small black box into her hand. It was a little heavy, as she’d already programmed a destination into it. She quickly told her, “Take this and get as close as you can to these two. It’ll activate in about 30 seconds.”

The ball of light was already starting to warp. Clenching her fist, Azalie continued, “Get out of this city as fast as you can. You should be able to do it with your dragon and this boy’s sorcery. Get out of here, even if you have to turn this whole damned city to rubble. Before that big lug—” She indicated Quo. “—gets out of the cathedral... I think in a little while, he should be trapped here...”

“W-Wait—” the girl protested, sounding hesitant.

But Azalie wasn’t looking her way anymore. Her eyes were focused on Quo, and the ball of light that was rapidly fading.

“What are you saying?” Claiomh asked. “Orphen fell down there...” She pointed at the dreary underground lake. The whirling sand in the air further obscured the deep dark of the water. The sand was even thicker down here

than it was above ground.

“We’ve gotta... We’ve gotta save him...” She sounded like she wasn’t even sure what she was saying—the reality of the situation probably hadn’t sunk in yet.

“I’ll take care of him,” Azalie stated resolutely.

A short but heavy silence descended between them.

“Who...” Claiomh suddenly started, as if the thought had just occurred to her. “Who are you? Who are you to Orphen?”

“I’m...” Azalie licked her dry lips as she answered. The ball of light that was keeping Quo pinned shrunk... and vanished.

“I’m...” She stood. She took a step toward Quo. It was just about time for the teleportation device to activate. “I’m his...”

With a slight vibration of the air, the device transported Claiomh and the two men. Azalie closed her mouth. There was no point in finishing the sentence now that the person she was talking to was gone. She stared stonily at Quo.

The wings of Quo’s armor opened up as if they were trying to embrace something larger than him. He put the gun in his hand into his pants pocket—or, more likely, a holster inside the pocket—and folded his arms. He pressed his lips into a thin line and said to her, as if through ventriloquism, “You plan to fight me one-on-one...?” In actuality, his mouth was probably moving, but the movement was almost too small to see.

Fwap! The wings of light moved, cutting down something a few meters away from him—it was one of the pillars that held the priest soldiers up near the ceiling.

The pillar snapped in two and slowly collapsed. But before it fell, the priest soldier trapped atop it slid off and smashed against the stone floor. He plummeted seven or eight meters straight to the ground. He then lay still. He might have hit his head on the landing.

As Azalie stood frozen in surprise, Quo repeated the process again, then again. When each pillar fell, the priest soldier atop it plummeted to the floor.

Some were still breathing when they hit the ground, but another swipe from Quo's wings finished them off. As Azalie watched in disbelief, several of them met their end.

"...What are you playing at?" Azalie asked, uncomprehending. But Quo only spared her a glance, clearly not intending to answer her.

He stopped his wings, however. Looking at her coldly—not calculating, but just devoid of emotion—he said, "Some things cannot be undone. Some sins cannot be atoned for. They can only be excused with death." If anything, he almost sounded carefree. "They shouldn't have seen. And that goes for you, too."

Realizing what he meant, Azalie leapt back. The wings swept through the spot she'd just been standing in. Several compositions she could use to fight back came to mind, but...

I got them out of here... That means there's no need to stall for time against this guy anymore. Plus, there was something she absolutely had to do.

As she leapt back, she twisted, showing Quo her back. Her view shifted. Before her now was the destroyed gate and walls, and the vast underground lake, as well as the woman suspended above it.

Black water. The Poet's Chamber, where darkness and sand whirled...

Krylancelo... Please, let me make it in time...

She took off running as fast as she could, and threw herself into the Poet's Chamber, the deepest part of the Kimluck Cathedral.



"...Who's this?"

"You know him, don't you? He's Krylancelo..."

Krylancelo vacantly watched the two exchange words, feeling feverish, his consciousness indistinct.

It wasn't just his consciousness, actually. His body seemed to be floating, too. There was no floor. There should have been a cold, stone floor... but he didn't think to look for it.

Because he was drowning...

“For now, I think he’s the only one who can change classes... Fina Tram wants Milan for her leadership class, and Swaine is old enough that I can’t imagine it would be efficient for him to switch classes now. But this is perfect, isn’t it? I mean, he knows the two you already have in your class.”

“I have my hands full right now,” the man said, looking Krylancelo’s way.

Krylancelo merely stared back at him, entrusting his floating body to the current around him.

“I don’t need any new students... Not for now, at least.”

“I don’t think there’s really any point in being stubborn right now...” The voice answering him was composed. It went on coolly, strictly, “I know who you are...”

Krylancelo noticed the suspense that hung in the air after that sentence.

“Why don’t you entrust it to him? If you don’t intend to entrust it to anyone, I have no more use for you...”

Left alone with Krylancelo, the man sighed. He looked down at Krylancelo and told him, “I will teach you every one of my battle techniques. Show me that you can learn them.”

The words didn’t make him feel anything. They just reminded him that the man in front of him was the strongest sorcerer on the continent.

Just before Krylancelo lost consciousness, the man said, “If you cannot surpass me, then what is the meaning of my teaching you?”

Krylancelo heard the words clearly, but he couldn’t comprehend them.

“What’s the point of this training? I’m never gonna be up against a white sorcerer.”

“...You’ll understand one day. I know the regret of not having the power to stop someone when you know you must...”

That was when he finally realized he was dreaming. Before he knew it, he was standing in a void.

This is a dream... Orphen thought vaguely. *No... Is this what happens when you die...?* If that was the case, then he didn't want anything to do with death.

He made up his mind and opened his eyes. There was nothing but darkness around him. It wasn't the dark of night—nothing that gentle. It was a cold darkness, devoid of light completely.

I thought when you died, everything returned to nothingness... he cursed, feeling thoroughly disappointed with the gods. *I'm just standing here with nothing around? What am I supposed to do? I mean, if I'm already dead, it's not like I can die any more... Geez, this sucks...*

He stopped then, sensing something. Not his body—his body was already completely still. He stopped his thoughts. He didn't know why, but in that instant when he sensed something, he became unable to think anything anymore.

But as his consciousness became more muddled, his senses only seemed to sharpen.

Eventually... a few seconds passed.

Before him, he saw a woman.

A beautiful woman, who he'd seen somewhere before, was standing there. There was no wind, but the green robe she wore was billowing. As was her long hair, also green. She was staring at him with a tranquil expression on her face. Her eyes were narrowed in what looked to him like a smile. Those green eyes seemed to shine in the darkness...

...She's... He quickly recalled. She was the woman he'd seen right before his death. The woman suspended in the air above the underground lake. The woman who, despite the fact that her neck had been in an iron grip, clearly broken, had stared at him.

The woman that Death Instructor had called... Goddess.

Goddess? He looked at her and put that term to her in his mind. *The Weird Sisters... the three sisters of fate that the Kimluck Church worships...* The goddesses who wove people's fate.

"No... That can't be... I mean..." he started. He couldn't move, and he didn't feel his throat or his mouth moving, but for some reason, he felt like he could hear his own voice. A thought that almost irritated him went through his head.

"Am I... alive?" It was a ridiculous thought, but Orphen was almost certain of it as he said it. He only had a vague sense of why, but he felt like the dead couldn't speak.

"Am I—" he tried to ask again, but stopped. The woman's lips were moving. Thin lips that he felt he might lose track of if they weren't marked in some way.

She was trying to tell him something. Orphen waited for her words, almost frightened in spite of himself. The woman's mouth moved.

"Once—"

It was a simple word, but for some reason, it made Orphen shudder, all his hair standing on end. He listened intently, feeling for some reason like he had to.

The woman continued quietly, almost listlessly.

"Once... the world was just that. It was the world, nothing more, nothing less, no need to provide anything to those who existed upon it. For at that time, the only beings who lived in the world were immortal giants. These giants, the Ymir, would exist in perpetuity even without land, without sea, without wind, without sun or stars. But one day, the world changed. The void was filled. And what filled the void completely... was the gods."

Orphen was silent at this, expectations betrayed. *It's just... some stupid myth...* He furrowed his brow. He might have been told this story as a child, but if he was, he'd never paid it any mind, and he'd all but forgotten it by now. She was reciting this story dispassionately.

"When the gods descended upon the land, it had no name. It was naught but a giant void. A hollow valley—that was the world. Some might have called it Ginnungagap. But when the gods destroyed the giants and the land was stacked

with their corpses, no one called that land ‘empty’ anymore.”

“Who... are you?” Orphen squeezed out the question in a low voice. The woman didn’t answer. She didn’t even look like she’d heard. She merely continued on with her story.

“The gods used their power to slaughter the giants... with the exception of the largest among them, one great snake, that they could not kill. The snake was simply too enormous. It was so large that none could touch it or see it. The only snake like it in the world. The one true dragon, Ouroboros. When they realized that they couldn’t kill it, the gods reluctantly created the world on the inside of the snake’s coil. A true world, that was not hollow. Life was birthed in the seas, and moved to live on the land. The world had been created. Encircled by the sleeping snake. This no longer hollow world was called Midgard, the Serpent’s Garden. And the land made of the giants’ corpses was called Jötunheimr, the Giant’s Continent.”

The woman moved her gaze from Orphen for the first time. She tilted her chin up and to the side, giving a long-off look into the darkness and frowning slightly.

“...Who called them that...?” the woman asked herself, and gave herself a response as well. “The gods were all-powerful... and all-knowing. They had no need to give things names. The gods reigned over the world with no will, and with no meaning. The ones who had need to name the world... were us. We, the Nornir...”

She lowered her head as if relieved to hear the answer. Then she turned to Orphen again and went on.

“At the time, there were six superior species in the world—”

Flash. Suddenly, something like white waves appeared in Orphen’s vision. He blinked his eyes, bewildered.

“They built up cultures, societies, and at the height of their quests for knowledge, they set out to determine what their world was—”

Flash! More waves. Stronger than the last ones.

“What is this...?” Orphen rubbed his eyes, looking around him. The darkness was... slowly fading. When he realized that, he felt uneasy. He could see light

flashing somewhere far off in the distance. That light was the source of the waves. Several lines of light flashed across his vision, piercing through the darkness.

Orphen broke out into a sweat. He turned around and found a ball of flame rushing at him at an incredible speed.

“I spin thee—” he started chanting, but an intense pain seared through his head. He screamed and fell to his knees, and the flames consumed him.

He screamed again, squeezing his eyes shut. Writhing within the flames, he clawed at the floor as he felt a sensation like his skin was being flayed. His nails easily split and tore off against the stone floor.

The floor...? It was a familiar floor.

He gasped and leapt up, finding himself in front of a tall man. The man stared down at him expressionlessly. In his usual posture, with just his right fist clenched.

The... training room... at the Tower of Fangs? This was the indoor training room for martial arts. He was there. With only one other person, in front of him.

Master... Childman...? He slowly looked down at his body. He wore his familiar... no, the workout clothes that *were* familiar to him when he was at the Tower. The soft, absorptive fabric felt so nostalgic that he almost shivered at the sensation of it.

His teacher, Childman Powderfield, was still in his combat stance. He had to get up quickly. Orphen tried to push up from the floor and stand, but his body wouldn't move any more. He was stuck with his hands against the floor, elbows trembling.

Eventually, Childman moved. Orphen braced himself for his teacher's strike. However...

“...Krylancelo. Are you not going to stand?” Childman merely asked him quietly.

I can't stand. Orphen answered inaudibly. He must have hurt his neck too,

because he couldn't look up either, but he realized that Childman had sighed from the sound of his breath.

His words came after his sigh. "Do you also think it's only natural that you lose to me?" He seemed to sigh again. "If you cannot surpass me, then what is the meaning of my teaching you?"

His consciousness was fading, but... *No... I... No!* Orphen ground his teeth like he was trying to chew through something and kicked off from the floor. He stood, just like that, like everything until now had only been a dream. Standing, he stared at his teacher. But Childman was gone.

No, he was there. But, for some reason... he looked like someone else. He wasn't in his training wear. He wore a black robe. But he looked smaller... and he was far too expressive. He'd never seen anything that looked like true emotion in those black eyes, but now... there was a hollow sadness in them.

What?! Orphen frowned when he saw what he looked like in the reflection of those eyes—and when he looked down at himself, he was even more shocked.

This isn't my body... The person reflected in Childman's gaze was a woman with green hair and green eyes.

She was similar to the woman who had been standing before him earlier, but different. They wore the exact same green robes, but this one also looked younger. They were different individuals, too. Similar-looking, but different people. And he'd seen this one before.

This is...? He was confused, but he looked at Childman for the time being. That was when he finally realized where it was he was standing.

It was a familiar place. A great hall with white walls that looked like marble. The ceiling was so high that you had to crane your neck up to see it. Behind him, there was an altar. For some reason, he could see that without turning around.

At the altar, there were representations of the dragon species: a horse, a wolf, a lion, a bear, a rhinoceros—all surrounding a statue of a beautiful woman. Beyond the statues, there was a portrait of the woman he'd become.

The portrait was a lie. It made the woman look much younger, and full of life. With that point alone, the portrait was rendered meaningless.

Orphen paused for a moment, confused. Had that thought been his? *Is it something this body... she thought? And it's mixing with my consciousness...*

“You have been forced to accompany me for too long. I do feel guilt for this.” He was shocked when she spoke. His body had just moved to produce the words without his input. Something pained entered Childman’s expression as he directed his gaze up at the ceiling.

His body seemed to know the woman’s name, but Orphen himself also remembered it somewhere in the depths of his mind. She was Sister Istersiva. It was the name the killer doll at Fort Basiltrice had sneered...

What... is this? he asked himself, terribly confused. There was no response, but a moment later...

—*Wake up!*—

Someone called him, and his consciousness flew off somewhere.



This may have been a mistake... She had been taught for years not to think that, but couldn’t help considering it now.

The water of the underground lake was heavy. It was pitch black and so cold it stung. She regretted jumping in with her clothes on, but she’d had no time to do otherwise.

Azalie had no idea how deep she’d swum. She’d dove in after her brother, but she couldn’t see anything down here, and the temperature was so low, she was worried it might stop her heart. But would that be minutes from now or seconds?

If Krylancelo’s unconscious... then he shouldn’t be too far down. He should float up... In which case, there would be no point in swimming too deep.

With that decided, she turned around, pointing her head toward the surface. She made sure not to move her limbs too much and strained her eyes as hard as she could in the black water.

He would surely float up... but she couldn’t let him surface. She was certain Quo Vadis Pater was still watching the lake from above...

It's alright, Krylancelo. I'll... She held on, knowing that she could drown in an instant if she let her guard down, and told herself firmly, like a spell, *I'll protect you...*

Sinking would be bad, but rising to the surface wouldn't be better. She decided to just wait for him to float up to her. There was no reason for her to be, but she was confident that he would come back to where she could reach him.

And eventually... in her limited vision in the dark, the blackness nearby her seemed to sway a bit. *No... I'm just seeing things*, she judged coolly, keeping herself from taking off too hastily. If she moved around too much, her stamina would run out in no time at all.

It didn't help that she couldn't use her sorcery underwater. Still, she continued to wait, her impatience making every second seem like an eternity. But she couldn't let it get the better of her. Those who weren't masters of their own minds couldn't call themselves sorcerers.

Suddenly, something brushed against her, from just in front of her. It flowed slowly toward her, powerlessly reaching an arm over her shoulder. Azalie almost gasped, but held down the urge, instead reaching around to grasp the object back. She ran her hands over it, confirming that it was without a doubt a human body.

A human body that was completely limp, unmoving. There was no way for her to check whether he was breathing or not, of course.

Krylancelo! Azalie shouted in her heart, embracing him tight and kicking at the water behind her—she swam horizontally under the surface.



From the size of the underground lake, there was no way he could see the whole surface with what illumination he had. As long as she moved a decent distance from where she'd jumped in, Quo Vadis Pater shouldn't be able to find them. If she could just swim to the shore, she'd be able to rest there.

The question is... She was all too aware. *Is there even a shore?* From above, the lake—this Poet's Chamber—had just appeared to be water collected in an underground cave. There were three things she knew just from looking at it. One, it was incredibly vast. Two, the edges of the lake might be sheer cliffs. And three, above the water, there was a woman hanging by her neck.

As she swam through the freezing water, Azalie tried to focus on the positives. Problem was, no matter how optimistically she tried to think, she couldn't come up with any.

Kimluck... Yggdrasil Cathedral... the inner sanctum at its depths. This is the Poet's Chamber... She'd anticipated danger and had tried to steel herself for it, but drowning wasn't something she'd expected to have to deal with.

Swimming while pulling along a body that's clearly heavier than yours is a pretty insane thing to do, she reflected. Her freezing limbs grew heavier every time they cut through the water. She knew that she wouldn't sink as long as she remained calm, but there was still a harrowing sense of pressure eating away at her.

I have to hurry... if I don't start warming him up soon, even Krylancelo won't last long... The same thing went for her too, really.

Eventually, as her fingers pushed through the water, they felt something hard in front of her.

I made it! Her fingers brushing against rock that was colder than the water, she kicked forward one last time. She smacked her face into the rock, but she was so numb by that point that she didn't even feel it.

She started rising to the surface, trying to figure out how deep she'd been swimming. It was impossible to tell which way was up in the black water, but she let her instinct guide her.

How long... has it been... since I dove in? It could have been one minute, or

two... No, with how cold the water was, she couldn't have been swimming that long. Under a minute, she estimated. Suddenly, the body on her shoulder regained its weight.

Her head broke the surface of the water. Panting to take in air, she checked to find out where she'd ended up. When she looked up, she could see light far up in the distance. An almost vertical wall rose up before her, and she could see a large tunnel some ten meters up. The light was illuminating the lake from there. But there wasn't nearly enough of it, of course.

The tunnel was where she'd been a minute ago. That was only natural, since after she'd jumped in, she'd swum for the closest wall, which was where she'd jumped from. She tried to see if she could find Quo, who she was sure was looking down into the lake, but either because of her exhaustion or because of the shock of the cold water, she couldn't seem to focus her eyes very well. The only thing she could see clearly in the darkness was the face of her brother, held over her shoulder.

Krylancelo... she called to him, though not with her voice. He had his eyes closed, completely unconscious. His soaked hair clung to his forehead. He was likely so pale because of the blood loss on top of the cold... she was fairly certain he'd been shot by Quo before he'd fallen into the water. She couldn't be optimistic enough to think that maybe he'd just been surprised and fallen in.

Azalie got a better grip on him and looked around the area again. She had to find somewhere she could get out of the water and rest. If she didn't warm herself up, she'd be dead in a matter of moments. It was bad enough that she'd jumped into freezing water with no preparation. And as for her brother, he was badly wounded, too. But no matter where she looked, all she saw was the sheer cliff face. There was nowhere for her to take shelter.

Can I do it without that Death Instructor noticing? She swam nervously in place, raising her left arm. Holding her brother tight with her right arm, she concentrated. "Begone..." she whispered, touching her fingers to the wall.

A small hole appeared in the wall like a bubble popping. The hole widened and deepened as she watched. In a few seconds, there was a cave ten meters deep where previously there was nothing but a wall. It was a few centimeters

up from the water. It didn't end up quite as wide or tall as she'd been planning, but it was a size an adult could stand in comfortably.

Takes some effort to dematerialize matter... Using the last of her strength, she pushed her brother's body up into the cave. It wasn't a soundless effort, but there should still have been ample confusion above. Quo shouldn't have been able to hear this much. That was Azalie's first optimistic thought after diving into the water.

After pushing her brother up out of the water, she climbed into the cave herself. Her overworked muscles groaned and her body cried out for sleep, but... *Not yet.* She bit her lip and shook her head. She couldn't rest yet.

Crawling over to her brother, who lay unmoving on his back—practically clinging to him, she thought with a bitter grin—she put a hand against his chest.

His heart might have been beating, but he wasn't breathing.

Azalie clucked her tongue and raised her head. He'd definitely inhaled some water. Not a lot of it, since he'd floated up, but... With her own senses numbed as they were, she had no way to tell whether his heart was beating or not, but she had to at least get him breathing. She covered his nose and mouth and tried to resuscitate him.

There was no response when she blew breath between his chilly lips.

The worst possibility flashed through her mind. *It's been some time since he was shot... more than a minute at least. Has he already died from shock...?* It was definitely a possibility. If his heart had been stopped since the moment he was shot, it might be too late now.

"I don't accept that," Azalie spat out along with the lakewater she'd sucked from her brother's mouth.

She had no time to look at his face. Yet it felt almost like that was all she was doing as she attempted mouth-to-mouth once more. Her eyes were closed as she breathed into him, but she still felt like she could see his face somehow.

It was a pale white, like he was asleep inside a block of ice. She had no light, but she could still see it clearly. She'd probably never seen it this closely before in her whole life, she realized, which almost made her want to laugh, absurdly.

He didn't seem to have changed much from the brother she could remember, but at the same time, he also *had* changed.

Azalie raised her head, irritated at her lack of success resuscitating him. She shuddered and realized that she needed to warm up. Both of them needed to.

Will I make it...? If I exhaust myself any more... she worried, though she knew she didn't have another option, so she couldn't afford to hesitate. Azalie opened her right hand and pointed it upward. She whispered a spell that would bring her the world that she desired.

"...Summer..." With a small sound, a lightless heat gathered atop her hand. She couldn't see it, but she could feel the heat soaking into her chilled skin. There would be less of a danger of freezing to death now at least.

"...Ngh?!" she shivered and opened her eyes before they could close completely. Her consciousness had faded for a moment.

I can't... sleep yet... she groaned, grinding her teeth.

She looked down at her brother's face and covered his nose again. *Wake up... Krylancelo. Wake up... please!* Pressing her lips to his, she blew breath into him as hard as she could. And in the next instant...

"Gbh!" His body spasmed. Her brother started to breathe, coughing up the water he'd inhaled.

...Yes... she could barely form the thought.

Her brother hadn't regained consciousness, but he was spasming, spitting up water. She sucked more of it from his lips and his breathing quickly calmed.

"Just have to do something about the wound now..." She felt like some 70% of her brain was asleep at this point, but she held onto her consciousness as she looked down at him. She groped around, searching for the gunshot wound.

Here it is... Azalie blinked a few times, feeling blood somewhere around his abdomen. She peered closely at him and found a small wound. Stupidly small, yet endlessly deep. A bullet hole.

She reached around to his back and found another wound, and judged that the bullet was no longer in his body.

Brushing aside the wet hair clinging to her face, she poured all her power into a composition—and with a spell rasped out, his wounds closed. They seemed to, at least.

For now, if she'd stopped the bleeding, that was fine. She couldn't hope for much more.

You'll be alright... you won't die. Not you, Krylancelo... She looked down at his face as he slept and tried to stroke his cheek, but she couldn't move her arms anymore.

So exhausted that she couldn't even think anymore, Azalie collapsed on top of her brother. She didn't want to fall asleep on the rock. Her brother's body was still cold, but it wasn't hard. It couldn't be, since he was still alive. That was about as far as she could think at the moment.

The moment before she fell asleep, she looked up for one reason or another, and just in the middle of her vision, she could see the woman hanging high up in the air above them. She hung there, swaying, like a green flag. She felt like the woman was staring intently down at her, but Azalie couldn't bring herself to care.

Chapter VIII: Orphen

There was nothing worse than this northern earth, he was forced to admit.

“...It’s true. Dammit. So were they right, then?” he spat, looking around. There was a map in the hand he held out from his cloak.

“What do you mean, ‘we’ll fulfill our duty and deal with the aftermath of this war’? You rebuild your own towns all nice and neat and you just leave the land out in the middle of nowhere alone?”

The Kieselhiman continent had been ravaged by war decades ago, though there were many people now who had grown to adulthood untouched by the continent-spanning conflict. He was one of those adults.

But even if the land was regaining its bounty as the Celestials said, its progress was agonizingly slow. There were just too few areas recovered enough for human habitation.

“I know that’s why we can’t waste this land, but still... tch, dammit...” he kept cursing to himself. “What exactly am I supposed to tell those idiots in the cultivation group? That the place we were all traveling to was a wasteland and it’s the advance team’s fault for screwing up?” He kicked at the sand as he grumbled his complaints.

The sands that blew here in the northernmost reaches of the continent were a remnant of the war, but only the Celestials knew exactly what it was—only those smug women. Indeed, it might have been because of their power that the continent was now recovering as it was, and it was also those women who invited humanity into their cities and protected them when they first washed ashore on this continent in the middle of the war and were about to be completely eradicated. However... he harbored baseless doubts about them in his heart as he walked through the sands.

The winds whipped by his ears with a sharp sound. Carrying with them not withered plants nor dry earth but just dead sand.

He narrowed his eyes, squinting. He thought he could see something in the distance, in a break between the whirls of sand...

He raised his head. Standing behind the thin paper partition, he listened intently to the sound of the flickering flames of the candles. It was all the same as usual. However...

He groaned. Bitterly. As if he were being burned.

“O Goddess... Torture me no longer... no longer...” He clenched his fist, his nails digging into his palm.

He had a bad premonition. As if awaking from a nightmare. Though he did not dream.



“...You really made a mess of things, didn’t you, Quo?” Lapointe told the large man before him after sweeping his eyes over the area.

Worse than a mess, he added irritably to himself. It would take an incredible amount of time and money to repair all this. The entire hall was thoroughly destroyed, as if someone had taken a hammer from one end to the other and smashed it all up, inch by inch. Frankly, he had no idea what sort of destructive power could cause damage like this.

Though he had received a report that it had been done by sorcery.

Disgusting... he cursed inwardly. Not just sorcery. Even that report disgusted him.

The walls, the doors—even the gate that led to the forbidden Poet’s Chamber had been smashed to pieces. The damage was atrocious.

The large man in the red, ugly armor—Quo—responded to him, voice terribly calm. “The intruders destroyed the gate.”

“Yes. I’m sure they did. And what did you do, then? Just let them get away?” It wasn’t as if Quo’s attitude had touched a nerve, but Lapointe grimaced all the same.

He sighed and looked down at himself—he wore the special priest robes of a

Head Instructor. Though there wasn't much to set them apart from the robes the rest of the Church officials wore other than their slightly more complex design. They were, of course, white, though over the years the fabric had yellowed with the constant exposure to the sands. No matter how thoroughly they were washed, the color of the sand would never come out of these robes.

In any case, the Head Instructor was younger than the large man before him, but their standing was the same. No, the Head Instructor title that Quo held to hide his status as a Death Instructor was fake, so Lapointe's standing was a little higher.

Lapointe glanced to his side. Next to him was another of the Death Instructors tasked with protecting the Holy City, Carlotta.

From that glance, it was already clear to him that the woman was simply bored by her current situation, which only increased Lapointe's irritation.

"...Including one apostate, the intruders numbered three, and you let all of them get away. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Quo answered, not looking at him but at the "goddess" above the lake.

However...

"There were four," Carlotta added, sounding amused. She also wore the exact same Head Instructor robes as Lapointe, but the impression they gave off differed depending on who wore them. The robes actually looked rather attractive on the woman, though if he were to give his honest opinion that they looked like a nightgown, she would probably not be too pleased.

Or would she laugh? Lapointe raised his eyebrows as such inappropriate thoughts crossed his mind. "...Four?"

"Mädchen Amick is part of the revolt. She attacked me last night in my bedroom."

"Have you lot ever given any thought to solidarity?" he said the words with as much ire as he could muster, but Carlotta merely shrugged, smiling sarcastically.

"I'm afraid that's just not possible. Mädchen's never liked me, after all. Not

since the day we met.”

Lapointe turned around, not even bothering to hide his irritation. The demolished floor was covered in blood. “...So, a mere three intruders killed Name Only and 23 priest soldiers, destroyed the door to the Poet’s Chamber, witnessed the goddess herself, and then made a clean escape. Is that it? Just fantastic. I can’t wait to hear what His Holiness has to say about this.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve fought such formidable opponents,” Quo muttered.

“That’s an interesting thing to say,” Lapointe remarked, cutting off any further comment from Quo, and turned toward the destroyed gate. Then he noticed... “What’s that?”

There were marks like someone’s feet had slipped underneath the gate. Feeling a chill run up his spine, Lapointe turned back to Quo. “You didn’t let the intruders enter the Poet’s Chamber, did you?!”

“I did not,” Quo asserted.

Lapointe eyed Quo suspiciously. Even Carlotta had reacted to the words. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see unease on her face instead of her usual lackadaisical look. If Quo Vadis Pater was lying...

...No. Lapointe abandoned that thought. It was absurd to doubt Quo’s loyalty. It was like being suspicious of a dog.

Having nothing more to say on the matter, Lapointe turned around with a click of his heel. He made to exit the hall, leaving the two Death Instructors behind, when...

“Instructor Lapointe...” Quo’s quiet voice stopped him.

He stopped, being careful where he put his feet on the demolished floor.

Quo stepped over to him. “The security plan?”

“One of you, stay here and guard the Poet’s Chamber and the Yggdrasil Cathedral. The other one—I don’t care which—goes after the intruders, obviously. And if you don’t find them within 24 hours, well, I hope you’re prepared for the consequences.”

“Understood,” Quo replied, vexingly obedient. And... “Instructor Lapointe. One more thing.”

Lapointe turned around and snapped, “What?”

Quo was staring at him intently, arms crossed. “One of the apostates, Salua Solude, may come to you for help,” he stated evenly.

“I can’t imagine him doing so, personally.”

“Still, you are his only blood relation. If he comes to you—”

“I know. I’ll restrain him and hand him over to you. Is that satisfactory?” Lapointe Solude asked, and turned around once again, this time leaving the hall behind him.



“Bmgya!” something shouted beneath her feet.

Ignoring that for a moment, Claiomh blinked her eyes when she was suddenly thrust into darkness. The cathedral underground hadn’t been that bright either, but the change happened so abruptly that the backs of her eyes ached.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. She could hear the unending sound of the rain outside. Maybe because of that rain, she couldn’t see much of the sand that whirled ceaselessly in this city.

She was inside a small room—or maybe a small building. There was a simple bed, and other than that, just a pile of trash that had been shoved into the corner. The only openings to the outside world were a small window yellowed by dirt and a door that she assumed led outside.

She held her breath, unease pressing down on her, and looked down at Leki in her arms and the small black box in her hand. The box had lost the weight it had had earlier, and the glowing letters were gone from its surface as well. She didn’t know how, but it seemed the box had been responsible for bringing her here.

That’s right. What about Majic and... that Salua guy? she remembered, and looked around her. Majic was on the floor right where he’d been relative to her before they’d traveled here. He was limp, still unconscious. Salua was lying

nearby, too. His clothes, which had already been bloody, were covered in a fresh layer of red now.

He's not looking too hot. She sighed and leapt down from whatever it was that she'd been standing on this whole time. She could hear something go, "Gweh!" but she didn't let that bother her.

Majic looks okay... He was burned bad enough that I thought he was gonna die, but that woman really healed him up in just five minutes. Salua's... well, he's not okay, but he's still alive. Still... She felt her blood run cold. Claiomh looked up and glanced around the room again. She didn't have to look hard. It was quickly clear that what she was searching for wasn't there.

Orphen... He wasn't there.

She stood there for a moment, then came back to herself when she felt something touch her nose. She looked down to find Leki stretching up to press his front paw against her face.

What should we do, Leki? Claiomh sighed as the baby dragon pawed her face. *I couldn't do a thing. Orphen was hurt. A sorcerer not being able to use his sorcery counts as hurt, right? And he should have been able to count on me...* The last few moments played back in her mind.

There were only a few things she could remember, though. The truth was, she hadn't even been looking at Orphen when it happened. What she remembered was the warning that woman had shouted, the gunshot, and Orphen not even mustering a scream...

Him *not* screaming made her more uneasy. If he had just been injured, he would have been able to scream, her mind was telling her.

She stood there in silence for a time. Then she let out a breath. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

Making up her mind, she turned to Salua. She didn't know where they were, but unless she woke the two men up, they wouldn't be going anywhere from here. Majic was only sleeping, but that was clearly not the case with Salua.

"Yikes..." When she observed him up close, she was horrified by the breadth of his injuries. She had just healed his injuries about an hour ago, but he was

right back in the same situation he'd been in then. His wounds were shallow in some places and deep in others—it looked like someone had taken a blade and used it to doodle all over him.

Smelling blood mixed in with the scent of rain, she grimaced and took a step back. When she took another, she stepped on the thing she'd stepped down from a moment ago again—"Gugya!"—but she *really* didn't care about that.

"Umm..." a voice suddenly called out to her, and Claiomh turned around, surprised. She found a small figure sitting against the wall in a corner of the room.

The bespectacled figure spoke to her, scratching his cheek. "You showed up rather suddenly and then stepped on my brother..."

"Oh. Umm... It's Dörtin. What are you doing here?"

"Well, I don't know what to say... We've been here for a few days..." Dörtin muttered, pointing toward her feet for some reason.

He was a dwarf. They were a race indigenous to the continent who only lived in a southern nation now. That was what Claiomh had heard in the past, at least.

They were about 130 centimeters tall with round bodies, and wore fur cloaks traditional to their people. This one, Dörtin, also wore thick glasses. He was watching Claiomh with a nervous look.

"Here? For a few days?" Claiomh repeated, and then, hitting upon what question she should be asking, continued, "Where is here?"

"I think it's the shed of a caretaker for some important person's storehouse or something like that... I'm not really sure, since it wasn't us who found it."

"No, that's not what I mean. We're still in Kimluck, right? Where around?"

"Huh? I dunno... We only go to and from the market."

"That's no help..."

".....Hey....."

"Oh, right!" She heard a voice from somewhere—she thought she did, at least

—but she decided to prioritize Salua instead. Running over to him, she placed Leki on his prone form and patted the dragon on the head, telling him, “Fix him up good, okay, boy? You can do it, can’t you?”

Leki didn’t give her any sort of response, but Claiomh turned around anyway. She stepped back over to Dortin, who was watching her, looking rather dumbfounded.

“Listen here, you...” There was that voice again... “Vile intruder! You show up here without even opening the door and you have the *gall* to step on the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulgyaaa?!” She felt something under her feet again, but she really didn’t have time to pay attention to it as she trotted back over to Dortin.

“But you’ve been to the market, right?”

“Huh? Err, yes.” Dortin replied, looking strangely like he had more to say to her.

Claiomh pressed toward him again. The rain outside showed no sign of letting up, but it was getting a little lighter outside, since the sun was rising. “Can you show me the way to the cathedral?”

“I-I mean, it’s a big enough building that I’d think you could find your way to it without—”

“Don’t...”

Claiomh jumped at the warning and turned around in surprise. Salua, covered in wounds, was raising his head from the floor.

He pushed aside his bangs, which were starting to harden with blood, and rasped between heavy breaths, “Quo will be... waiting there... And not just him... There’s another one... Carlotta—”

As he stared fiercely at her, Claiomh gasped and pointed at him. “You’re kind of cute with Leki on your head, though.”

“You put him up there!”

Leki toppled off of Salua’s head, startled by his shout. He tumbled across the floor, straight into a pile of white ash that was in the middle of the room for

some reason. The baby dragon started to sneeze noiselessly.

Everyone watched him for a while, until...

"Augh... I feel faint after shouting..." Salua let his head fall to the floor again.

"Hey, wait a second, what's a Carlotta?" Claiomh asked him.

"Carlotta Mausen. She's a Death Instructor, one of the assassins who defend the Kimluck Church. There's two people guarding the cathedral right now: Quo Vadis Pater and Carlotta Mausen."

"Just two?" Claiomh said, pursing her lips, and Salua lifted his head up again.

He gave a sardonic laugh. "Two's enough if we don't have a way to pierce Quo's armor... the Ifrit."

"We'll figure something out!"

"...Well, we could manage with him, maybe..."

"Huh?" Claiomh was surprised when he suddenly agreed with her.

While she stared quizzically at him, Salua pulled himself into a sitting position. He dragged himself to the wall and leaned against it, facing her. "Carlotta's a different story, though. There's nothing we can do about her. That woman's..."

"...Is she strong?" Claiomh asked after picking up an ashy Leki, who had run over to her feet (stepping on something in the process).

Salua shook his head. "It's not that. It's... Well, anyway, we managed to make it out of the cathedral, lucky for us. We've got three opportunities here. The opportunity to hide, the opportunity to run, and..." His lips curled up. "The opportunity to arm ourselves."

"Well, we're not running," Claiomh replied immediately. "We're going back to the cathedral. If we can figure out how to use this weird box, we can do it right away, right?"

"Oh, I don't think that will work," Dorton interjected when she held up the small black box. The dwarf fixed his glasses as he continued sunnily, "That sorcerer woman tried it a bunch of times. It seems you can't teleport into the Yggdrasil Cathedral with that device."

“Why not?!”

“Uhh, I don’t know, but I don’t think strangling me will help...”

“Of course you can’t,” Salua stated plainly and Claiomh let go of Dortin’s collar. He was smiling again. It was a harsh smirk this time. “You won’t be able to get close to the cathedral with Celestial sorcery... of course you can’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you could... then the cathedral would’ve been destroyed long ago... heheh. Well... it’s nice enough that way, but... probably was boring, too...”

“...Do you think he’s acting a little strange?” Dortin whispered, fixing his collar.

Claiomh nodded and stared at Salua, who was still muttering something. It was dark, so she couldn’t see too well, but his face looked awfully pale...

“Maybe he’s not fully conscious because of his injuries...”

“He looks half-dead to me...”

“Now that you mention it, he does sort of look that way, doesn’t he?” She realized then that nothing had changed since she told Leki to heal him. He hadn’t done a thing.

“Geez, Leki. I told you to heal him!” She started to walk over to Salua, Leki in her arms, when she felt someone grab her hand and pull her back. She turned around to find Dortin grasping her hand. Claiomh blinked and asked, “Yes?”

“I just, err... If you go straight over to him, you’ll... err, have you noticed that you’ve been stepping on something over and over again for a while now?”

She had noticed. She hadn’t cared, though. “I did. It went, ‘Bmgya!’ when I first stepped on it, so I figured it was a bmgya bug.”

“Who’s a bug?!” The something lurched up from the floor.

It was another dwarf, identical to Dortin, but not wearing glasses. Under his fur cloak, he had an old longsword at his hip. He had footprints all over his face and was pointing his short finger at her and yelling.

“What’s with the round-trip flights you’ve been making over me again and

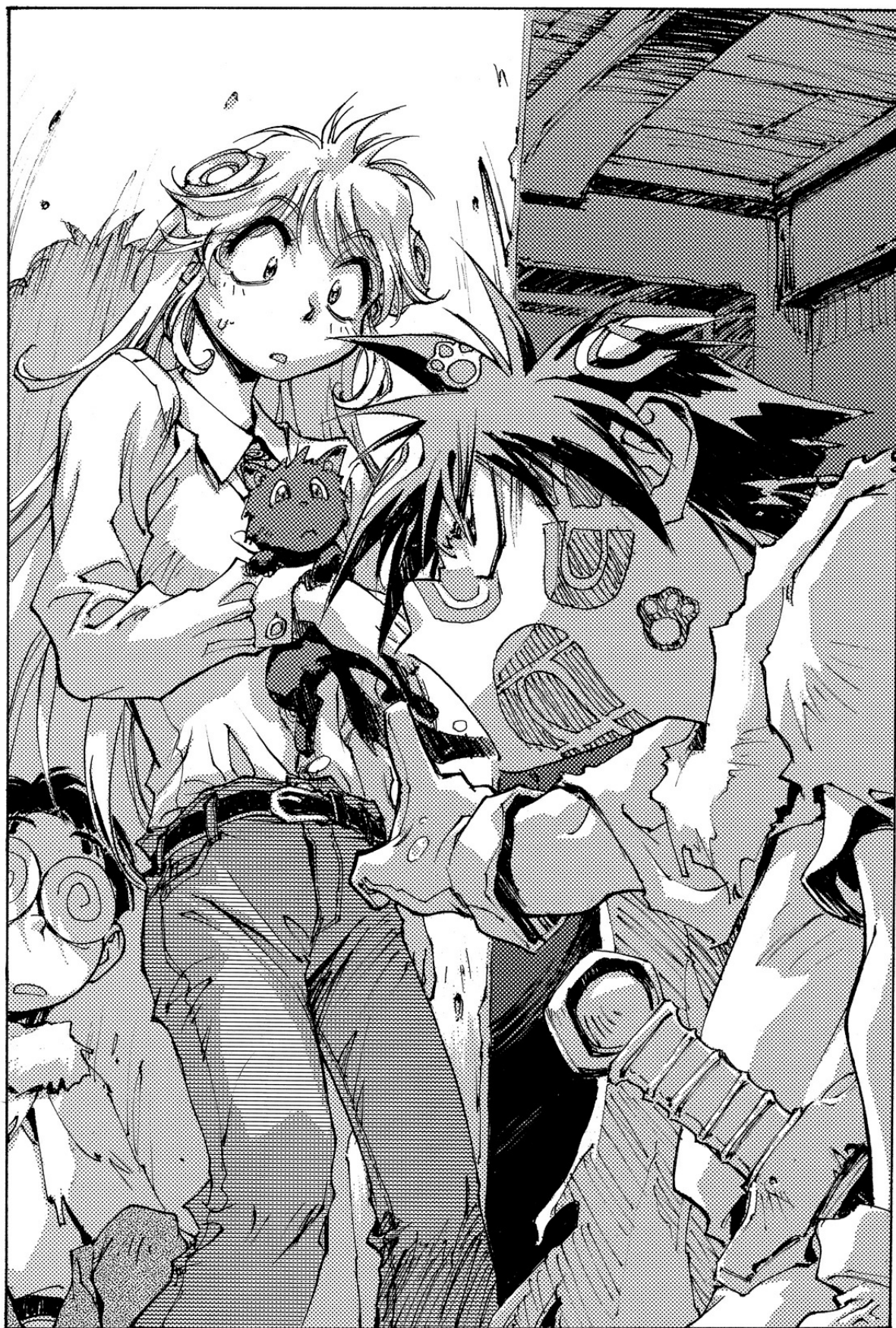
again?! Why step on me?! What for?!" It was Volkan. Dortin's brother.

Claiomh stared at him with her mouth open for a moment, then asked, "Oh hey, where were you?"

"I cannot believe you, you face-stepper! Listen here, are you not aware of the law that says that if you touch this fabled hero with anything lower than your knee you'll be sentenced to machine death by death machine?!"

"Can't say I've heard such delusions, no."

"It's not delusion, it's law, I said!"



Ignoring the wailing dwarf, Claiomh pushed him to the side and stepped past him.

“And what am I supposed to do with the humiliation of being shown the bottom of the foot of a stupid girl like you from underneath, anyway?! I think the only recourse is to subject you to death by crude oil makeup! Even the mayor would be shocked by that!” Volkan followed after her, shouting, but Claiomh ignored him.

“Er, I think you should leave it at that, Brother. You’ve become completely incomprehensible anyway—” Dortin came with him, worried, but Volkan wasn’t listening to him.

“Lemme just tell you right now, hey, you, fool’s gold girl! Listen to me—”

Claiomh turned around wordlessly. She looked down at the dwarf who was shouting at her, spittle flying, and his anxious-looking brother behind him, and sucked in a breath. Behind the still-shouting Volkan, Dortin was clasping his hands together as if praying for good fortune. “Leki! Put these two somewhere far away!”

In an instant, the two dwarves disappeared with a deep *glub* sound. The floor and everything underneath it had dropped out from beneath them and they’d fallen without even time to scream... Claiomh looked down as they plummeted rather quickly, a shocked look on her face, and muttered, “That’s not really the direction I had in mind when I said ‘far’...”

She looked down into the hole, but it went straight underground so deep that she couldn’t even see the two of them anymore. “...Well, it’s fine. It’s not like those two’ll die...”

Wrapping that up, Claiomh turned back to Salua. He seemed to have run out of energy at some point and was limp against the wall. He was still breathing, at least.

She tripped on something as she got close to him and grimaced. Looking down, she found Majic still asleep on the floor. Scratching her head irritably, she poked Majic’s cheek. “Wake up already!”

“Nnngh...” Majic groaned, and she returned to Salua.

As she crouched down next to the half-dead assassin and asked Leki to heal him, Majic started to stir.

“...Huh...? Why was I... sleeping?” he said those sleepy words with a sleepy voice and a sleepy face.

“Oooh, you’re so much trouble!” Claiomh complained and stood up. She clenched her fists in the dark room, where the sand continued to whirl, and raised her voice even more. Her blonde hair swayed as she shouted, “You’re not even hurt anymore, so just wake up already! I don’t even know where we are, but once Salua can move, we’re leaving! We don’t have the time for this! Agh, don’t just sit there with your mouth hanging open! Come on, pull it together! Ah! Hey, you just hid a yawn, didn’t you?! I can tell, you know!”

“G-Give me a second...” Majic shook his hands in front of his face, panicked and confused. He looked around and said, bewildered, “I have no idea what’s going on... Weren’t we just in the cathedral?”

“A bunch of stuff happened after you got taken out and were unconscious!”

“O-Oh...” Majic hurriedly patted down his clothing—was that his idea of “pulling it together?”—and Claiomh tapped her feet on the floor. Everything was annoying her.

Now that she thought about it, nothing had gone well for her ever since they’d first come to this town. In fact, even before they’d come here, she’d been almost left behind, and then right when they finally did get here, they ended up separated from Mädchen, who was supposed to be their guide. They thought they’d be able to get deeper into the city by following Laniote, but then they got caught up in a flash flood, and when Claiomh came to, they had somehow ended up in the cathedral in the city’s center. And then they were at their destination, but a weird man with an ugly face was lying in wait for them, and...

Orphen... Grinding her teeth, Claiomh tried to remember her final moments with him, not that she could remember something she hadn’t seen. But she felt like she had to remember what had happened.

He might have died.

The way that woman called Azalie had looked at her in the end... the way she'd sounded. That, at least, she could remember. And because she could remember that, her bad feeling about the situation was only getting worse.

But... *When I almost died, Orphen never gave up...*

Leki's sorcery must have been working. Salua's wounds were closing up.

Giving him a glance, Claiomh said to herself, determined, *There's no way I'm gonna run.*

A new day was about to dawn.



Darkness...

Water...

Orphen awoke, feeling cold and damp. And alongside that, or inside of it, there was a stark warmth as well.

He was in almost perfect darkness. An oppressive, deep blue darkness. His limbs were heavy, and along with the sluggishness that weighed his body down, he also felt a dull ache. He tried to remember something, but wasn't sure what exactly he should try and remember and eventually gave up on thinking.

...What is it...? Asking himself a vague question, Orphen raised his right arm. His right arm, at least, could move, it seemed. His trembling fingers wandered through the dark, sliding through space without touching anything.

Something suddenly touched his nose. He looked down. There was black hair brushing against his face.

He pushed it aside with his right hand. When the slightly curly hair moved out of the way, he saw a familiar face underneath it, resting against his chest.

"...Azalie?" he called. Her face didn't so much as twitch, though. He could feel the heat of her through each breath she exhaled.

He was lying on the ground, and she was sleeping on top of him. When he realized that, Orphen took a deep breath.

She saved me... He touched his side and found the bullet wound was gone.

She'd also healed the cuts inflicted by Quo's sword.

He could feel a heat with no apparent source. Azalie must have created it with her sorcery. She'd managed to save him from the underground lake, resuscitate him, and heal his wounds... It sounded easy enough in theory, but he didn't think it was something many people could pull off.

Yeah... You're probably just about the only one who could.

Where were they, though? He grimaced at the headache that was still tormenting him and realized that they were in a stone cave. Just outside of the entrance was the black water of the underground lake. And far, far above them was the hanging woman in the green robe...

We're still... in that lake. They called it the Poet's Chamber...

The hanging woman was staring straight at him. Staring, with her broken neck and tilted face. Looking back at her, Orphen sighed.

It's been 200 years since the Kimluck Church was established... Have you been here that whole time?

Suddenly, he remembered his dream. No, had that been a dream...? Doubtful, Orphen recalled the words the woman had spoken in his "dream."

Once—

Once... the world was just that. It was the world, nothing more, nothing less, no need to provide anything to those who existed upon it. For at that time, the only beings who lived in the world were immortal giants. These giants, the Ymir, would exist in perpetuity even without land, without sea, without wind, without sun or stars. But one day, the world changed. The void was filled. And what filled the void completely... was the gods.

But... when was that? Orphen closed his eyes and concentrated on what he could remember that *wasn't* from the dream. He'd heard the history of the continent countless times at the Tower of Fangs. He'd been made to memorize the whole thing, in fact.

No... Not the whole thing... Just what humans know of it. Only a mere third of the Kiesalhiman Continent's actual history. Kiesalhima. It's said that this history

began 1,000 years ago.

Back then, six intelligent species of beasts, the dragons, stole the secrets of the almighty power of “magic” from the gods and developed “sorcery,” a not-almighty power that they themselves could utilize. That angered the gods, and the dragons fled to the Kiesalhiman continent to protect themselves. Driving the indigenous beings of the continent, like the dwarves, to one small corner of the land, they became the dominant power on the continent and fought there with monsters that the gods had sent after them. The dragons managed to eke out a victory in this grand conflict. The continent was razed again and again by the battles, but the dragons repaired the land with their powerful sorcery, and lived there for hundreds of years...

Humans are said to have arrived on this continent 300 years ago. There’s no concrete records of this time because at the same time that humanity arrived, powerful monsters from the gods did as well. Caught up in the conflict the moment they arrived, humanity’s ancestors lost all record of their previous history and any ability to pass down their culture. By the time the dragons ended the conflict, humanity had regressed to the most basic level of civilization.

“And it was the Celestials who invited those humans into their cities and educated them...” Orphen realized he’d started vocalizing his thoughts. In a barely audible voice, basically no louder than just breathing. However...

“Living in Celestial cities, humanity rapidly regained its culture.”

Orphen was shocked at the familiar voice. Azalie had lifted her head from his chest. If she was awake, she could just get up off of him, but she remained atop him, pretending not to realize she could move (so Orphen assumed). She stared down at his face, resting her head on a hand propped up on his stomach.

Orphen continued, trying to hide the tremble in his voice. “...Of course... ‘rapidly’ still means it took decades...”

“This is also when humans learned Old Kiesalhiman, the Celestials’ language. After the Celestials ceased to be, the language became more simplified among the humans who remained.”

“...Eventually, Celestials mixed with humans... and that was...”

“That was the beginning of the history of sorcerers, and the history of all humanity,” Azalie whispered with a giggle. She shrugged her shoulders and said with eyes narrowed in mirth, “I can’t believe you remember the intro of our elementary history textbook, Krylancelo.”

“Everyone complained about those memorization tests, but I didn’t hate them so much.” Orphen sighed and covered his face with his hands. He went on, “Memorization was the only thing you would help me with.” He couldn’t see very well through the gaps in his fingers, but he thought Azalie had smiled at that. He thought he could see the tip of her tongue sticking out of her mouth, too.

“Yeah, I couldn’t really do anything else. Studying wasn’t really my forte. That was more Tish’s thing.”

“Tish was harsher than the teachers.” It was true. She’d put a pen in her mouth and pretend she wasn’t paying attention, but her eyes never left your hands. And then she’d always say, “How did you come up with that answer? Come on, think it over one more time, would you?”

“She was just annoying.”

“And maybe a little—just a little, really—short-tempered.” Sometimes she would throw things.

“Call her what she was: hysterical.”

Orphen almost smiled back at Azalie, but he stopped himself before it could show on his face. He told her quietly, “I think Comicon had a crush on her.”

Azalie seemed to pale at that.

Orphen slowly sat up, pushing his sister off of him. She didn’t resist, sitting back. He didn’t want to change his expression. Didn’t want to show any emotion on his face. Before she backed too far away, Orphen told her, “But he’s dead now. And so is Master Childman.”

“...And you want to say I killed them, right?”

Orphen pulled himself fully upright, shuddering at *her* lack of expression. She adjusted her posture, sitting against the stone wall of the cave. Orphen shook

his head. “No. I just wanted to say... it’s different now.” He forced his weak muscles to close his hand into a fist. “Everything’s different now.”

“I understand that.”

“I’m saying it because I didn’t understand it!” Orphen hissed, and hit the wall with his fist. The impact ran through his arm, but he didn’t care about pain like that anymore. An electric current shot up from his elbow and made everything below his shoulder numb. That sensation quickly faded and he was left with a dull pain.

“What are you here for?! Azalie... why did you come here? To see that goddess? What for?!” He opened up his throbbing fist and pointed at the hanging woman who Quo had called a goddess.

Azalie didn’t even look where he was pointing. She just continued to stare at him. Her faintly glittering brown eyes looked gold in the dark. They even resembled flames. There was still no emotion on her face. “I went and saw everyone from our class after returning to this form.”

Orphen couldn’t muster any words to say in response to her even tone. He wasn’t sure what the words meant yet.

“...And I thought they were imperfect as successors...”

“You’re not trying to tell me you dragged me to a place like this to re-train me, are you?” he asked sarcastically, but she showed no reaction.

“Forte is...”

Orphen was surprised again at the name she next mentioned.

Finally, a shadow of an emotion passed over her face. It was a bitter smile. “Forte is trying to take control of the Tower. Even though he knows it’s beyond him. The people at the top of the Tower are not easy to handle, to put it mildly. In fact, he was almost killed by Uoar Curlaine. It’s ironic, but he’s the one who knows best how unsuited he is to go up against the people at the top of the Tower. But seeing him, I... I thought he’d have control of the Tower in a few years. Because he understood how powerless he was. Knowing that, he’ll be able to find a way to make up for it. I don’t know how long it’ll take, but I think he’ll be able to do what the teachers were doing.”

Orphen listened to her silently. After a short wait, she continued her monologue.

“I was observing you, too.” She stopped there, unnaturally.

Orphen leaned forward. “And?” he urged her to continue, but she just looked down. He caught a glimpse of a sad look on her face before it was hidden from view. She looked to the side, gaze far-off. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, but maybe they were just reflecting waves from the surface of the lake. She looked at once like she was thinking and ignoring him.

“Azalie—”

“You said something about not being able to use your sorcery?” Azalie suddenly changed the subject.

Orphen bit his lip and started to reply, but—

“I haven’t been watching since you left that underground theater. So I don’t know what happened to you after that. Tell me. What do you mean, you can’t use your sorcery? And...” A beat. “You killed someone?”

She heard me... Something echoed inside his head like the low chime of a great bell. Orphen looked back at Azalie, frowning at his splitting headache. His heartbeat was deafening inside his own ears. He shuddered at the pain that was unending, but that he was unable to get used to.

Dammit...! Orphen squeezed his eyes shut and cursed. He was trying desperately to bear it, but the pain was only getting worse. He almost felt like screaming as he struggled under the waves of agony. Feeling bile rising in his throat with that scream, he—

Suddenly, the pain was gone.

There were gentle arms around him.

He looked up. Azalie had her arms around him. She patted him on the back and said, “Tell me everything. Anything you’re going through, I can fix it. That’s how it’s always been, isn’t it?”

Orphen didn’t ask if by “always” she meant up until five years ago or until recently. He couldn’t. Either way, she was dead wrong, he thought with a bitter

smile. She'd never fixed a single one of his problems. All she'd ever done was cause them.

"You're so stupid, you know that?" Azalie's voice was gentle. "You think you can take me on like that?" she whispered into his ear, genuine affection in her voice.

As he felt himself relax, Orphen realized that the ache in his head had been replaced by a stinging pain behind his nose. His eyelids drooped, heavy. The back of his throat was hot. As he relaxed, he felt tears spill from his eyes and he couldn't do anything to stop them.

She hasn't forgotten... Orphen reminded himself as he cried. *That I'm a Stabber who can kill her...*



"...Brother..." Down in a deep, deep hole, Dortin ground his teeth in frustration. He almost felt like he didn't even have teeth left to grind. He just miserably licked his lips and muttered, "Why does this happen...?"

"Mm." Even at a time like this, his brother's tone was full of confidence. Disappointingly, Dortin couldn't even bring himself to try to solve the mystery of where all that confidence came from. "By my analysis of that battle, I'd say your backup was severely lacking, making this entirely your fault. Though I suppose I'll forgive you after killing you by plugging up one of your nostrils," Volkan stated plainly.

"...That was... a battle...?"

"Well, it probably happened too fast for you to follow, but the moment that girl entered her battle stance, I, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, went to draw my sword. If that's not a battle, what is?"

"I suppose the theory's sound, at least..." *What was too fast to follow was how you lost*, he thought, but definitely did not say, as Dortin squirmed, trying to move.

He wasn't sure exactly how deep down they'd been buried, but the hole was tight. He'd felt like an incredibly strong power had forced them downward, digging them into the earth. That sort of thing would probably kill most people.

Dortin sighed, slightly annoyed that he'd survived.

"Well, what should we do about this?"

"Mm..." Volkan seemed to be considering the question rather seriously, which was unusual for him. "I can't move at all either. In this situation, best thing to do's probably..."

Keep still and wait for help. That was the first thing that came to Dortin's head. He didn't want to think about who would come to help them, of course.

And Volkan's answer was: "...Get violent."

"Huh?"

"Doooryaaaaa!"

And the nightmare began. Packed into a tight hole together, the two of them practically wrapped around each other, one of them got violent. Like a child throwing a tantrum, Volkan started to struggle, thrashing his arms and legs about as hard as he could. Of course, lodged as he was in the hole, all sorts of things prevented him from really moving: rock, dirt, Dortin's body.

"W-Wait! I don't think that's a good idea! Ow! Your finger went into my nose! Aaaaaaah!"

His brother continued to thrash about as if unable to hear his screams.

Dortin screamed some more, and then—*crumble*.

When the oppressive feeling around him changed into a feeling of freefall, Dortin came to a realization that this was likely just his lot in life.

Chapter IX: The Only One Who Can Kill Her

The hood of the cloak he'd pulled over his head to hide his face hung heavy, wet with the rain, over Majic. He looked out from underneath the hood at the cathedral district.

There was no one around in the ongoing downpour. It was still early in the morning, so maybe that was only natural, but there was something to the stillness that seemed almost frightful to him.

The rain, which had gained in intensity, reduced the road to a giant puddle as it collected beneath them and spilled into the gutters. From the gutters, it flowed into other streets and was carried off into the distance, its flow never ceasing. The flow of water has no endpoint. Majic couldn't remember where he'd heard that. Probably at school. It wasn't just water. Nothing had an endpoint, really. He thought such things hazily as he walked.

The town was magnificent, and it probably would have been even more impressive if not for the rain. The whole town was white. White was the standard color here, Majic remembered. Even with the sand turning to mud in the rain, it couldn't blot out all the white in the town.

On both sides of the wide, paved road were white walls of white buildings. And far off in the distance was the giant spire of the Yggdrasil Cathedral in the center of the city.

Majic looked up to get a view of the cathedral and the sky. In Kimluck, it only rained a few times a year, but once it started, it took a long time for it to stop.

Despite the fact that it had received such heavy rainfall in such a short amount of time, the city showed no signs of excessive water damage thanks to its efficient drainage system. Of course, at the same time, it had always been plagued by water shortages. The thick clouds covering the sky extended uniformly all the way out to the horizon. Their dark color mixed with the raindrops to tinge them a dull grey. Everywhere around the city were the white lines of rain falling at an angle to the ground and the eternal drone, getting

neither closer nor farther away, that accompanied them. The buildings of the cathedral district seemed to look shorter than they really were as the rain pounded onto them.

“Can something be done about this rain?” Claiomh complained nearby.

Majic turned around and found her following him, kicking a pebble along as she walked. Leki sat with trained posture atop her head, looking perfectly content. He thought the baby dragon would have been upset about the rain, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

...Come to think of it, Deep Dragons originally lived underwater, didn’t they? Satisfied with that recollection, Majic took a look at Claiomh’s expression. This one was clearly displeased. He whispered to her, “But if the rain stops, that sand will be back.”

“Then do something about the sand, too.”

“Not happening, I’m afraid,” Salua said, walking slightly apart from them. They’d tried to fix up his tattered priest robes as much as they could, but the rain was causing them to come apart at the seams again. “Hurry up and walk. Morning’s not gonna last forever.”

Majic saw dark shadows creasing the assassin’s face as he spoke lowly to them. His wounds had been healed with sorcery, but sorcerous healing didn’t tend to fix exhaustion. If anything, it tended to put *more* of a strain on the body.

“What happens at noon?” Claiomh muttered, lips pursed. Of course, it being Claiomh, even if she was annoyed, she still picked up her pace.

“At noon...” Salua started slowly. The rain seemed to blur his form slightly. “We might be out of time.”

“Huh?”

“No, it’s nothing. The important thing is, at noon, the real industrial types might start coming out, even in this rain. And nothing good’s gonna come of more people seeing us. You get me?”

Majic couldn’t see his expression very well because of the rain, but there was an odd lack of emotion in his voice. As if he were forcing it not to show. Majic

snuck a glance at Salua and whispered to him, “Where are we going right now?”

“I think I mentioned back in the dungeon...” Salua scratched his head and looked down over his shoulder at them. “You know... you guys always ask questions you should be able to figure out the answers to with just a little bit of thought. It never ends.” He groaned, at once both mocking and defeated. Pulling his fingers out of his sopping wet hair, Salua flicked his wrist to shake off the water and told them, “We’re going to my brother’s house.”

At a glance—not that it was small enough to see the whole thing with just a glance—the gate wasn’t putting up much resistance to the rain that pelted it.

“Whooooa...” Claiomh’s simple exclamation of wonder overpowered the din of the rain for a few short seconds. The rain quickly drowned her out, but the girl’s voice, which carried quite a bit, resounded again shortly. “I don’t think this is a good idea, though.”

“Hm? What is?” Salua turned around and asked as he carelessly walked up the fieldstone steps leading to the mansion’s gate. There were tall walls to either side of the gate extending out into the distance. This property alone might have been bigger than a city block.

Claiomh pointed at the spear-shaped grates of the gate and said, “It’s true that it looks like a nice mansion, but I don’t know if that’s reason enough to attack it and take it over.”

“I told you it’s my house!”

“I very much doubt that.”

“Why?!”

“Well, since it was your idea, you can take the front door, I’ll back you up from the back door, and Majic’s good with people, so he can take our statement to a newspaper.”

“Gaaaaaaah!” Salua wailed, clutching his head. He flailed about for a bit as the rain pelted down on him and then stopped still. Sticking his face in Claiomh’s, he grumbled, “Let me just ask... What exactly do you think I am?”

“A corpse lying in a dungeon,” came Claiomh’s easy answer.

The Death Instructor smiled at her with thinly veiled bloodlust—it was easy enough for Majic to notice, but since he didn’t know what to do about it, he decided to just observe.

“I-I am technically a priest, you know... I-I guess if you didn’t know, th-then it’s possible you could get the wrong idea about me... r-right?” Salua’s cheeks twitched as he spoke.

Claiomh had another instant response ready as she stroked Leki’s nose on top of her head. “But you’re like a total grunt among priests, right?”

“W... Well, priest soldiers are just unofficially treated as the lowest ranked priests. But, y’know—”

“Actually, since you were a corpse and you came back to life, I guess you’d be a zombie.”

Salua was speechless. His face was in shadow, so Majic couldn’t see his expression, but he felt like he could see something like steam rising from his trembling shoulders. And when he looked closer, he saw the man’s head faintly trembling as well. Claiomh was right in front of him, but she seemed not to notice... or maybe she just didn’t care as she continued.

“I’m not really sure what zombies are, but there used to be a lot of them, right? I remember they shoot zombie beams or something to increase their numbers. But like, their feet smell a lot so they’re super nasty, right? Hey Salua, what’s wrong? You’re shaking and your face is all red. You wouldn’t want people to see you and think you’re angry or something, would you?”

“Will you shut up already?!” Salua shouted and lunged for Claiomh to grab her, but the girl twisted out of the way and exclaimed with surprise:

“Excuse me! What was that for?!”

“What do you mean, ‘what was that for’?! You can’t spout all that crap! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“Huh...?” After standing there with a look of confusion on her face for a moment, Claiomh spun around and said to Majic, face utterly serious, “This is

bad, Majic. I think he really is a zombie, and now he's gone mad. Listen, you gotta watch out for his zombie beam, okay?"

"Umm..." Majic was entirely unsure how to respond.

Salua pointed at Claiomh and stomped his feet, shouting, "What the hell is a zombie beam, huh?! Are you sure *you* can't fire beams from those stupid hair whirls of yours?!"

"Aaah! Why would you say something like that about someone's hair?!"

"Hey... come on, you two..." Majic raised his voice, trying to get in between the two of them. He glanced around the area and then looked back at them. It didn't look like anyone had heard their voices and come out into the street, but Majic couldn't imagine they'd be so lucky for long. "Don't shout at each other like idiots—"

The two of them both whipped their heads his way and glared at him at that.

Majic took two steps back and put his hands up. "Ah, no, umm, I just mean it seems kind of pointless..."

"You should just tell the fools they're being foolish."

When he heard the unfamiliar voice, Majic realized that the sound of the rain had changed. It was a bit softer now than the hard sound of the downpour on the pavement.

He turned around. There was a man standing behind the gate into the mansion. A man about 30 years old, standing on the stone paving that led from the gate deeper into the yard. The rain sounded different because it was hitting the man's umbrella instead of the stones.

The man stood on the other side of the fence, umbrella against his shoulder, staring intently at the three of them, black, unmoving eyes cold. He was tall and well-built, but it looked less like muscle and more like he'd just started to gain weight at his age. In contrast with his black umbrella, the man's clothes were white. They looked a lot like Salua's... *Priest robes*? Majic's suspicions were quickly confirmed.

"Bro..." Salua muttered, his face more meek than Majic had ever seen it

before.

“Fool,” the man repeated. “You’ve always been a fool.” As he spoke, the man pulled something long and thin from his billowing priest robes. Even in the din of the rain, Majic could clearly hear Salua gasp.

The man had drawn a sword.



“Hmmm...”

Dortin glanced at his brother, who was groaning, arms crossed. Of course, it wasn’t like he could actually see him in the pitch black of the underground. He was just guessing from his usual behavior.

Underground. Fall. Brother. Groan. Crossing his arms like it had nothing to do with him.

Dortin sighed heavily. He did it quietly, though, so his brother wouldn’t hear. “What should we do about this...” It wasn’t as if he particularly wanted an answer to the question, but staying silent didn’t feel right to him either, so he muttered those words. He really had no intent to consult his brother, of course.

“Indeed...” He could picture Volkan nodding his head, full of confidence, like they were in broad daylight. “Well, since we fell, it follows that if we climb up, we’ll be back where we were before. That’s what your brother’s determined.”

If we climb, eh? Dortin sighed soundlessly again, at his wits’ end. That Claiomh girl had buried them however many meters into the ground earlier, and then from that hole they’d fallen at least another ten. Because of his brother’s violence, the bottom of the hole they were in had given out from under them, but it seemed there was some sort of underground passageway just underneath them. It was pitch black down there, so he couldn’t see anything, but from the echoes of their voices, it seemed to be pretty large. It was at least wide enough for several people to walk through side-by-side.

The echoing changed depending on which direction they spoke in, too. It seemed to be a pretty large-scale underground passageway.

He didn’t know exactly how high the ceiling was, but since he couldn’t stretch

up and reach it, it didn't seem like he'd need to consider that. Dortin had tried to reach it at least twenty times now, so he was pretty confident about that.

"I don't think we're going to be climbing back up, Brother."

"Mm. Your plans are always so half-baked," his brother stated with a completely straight face (Dortin imagined, again), to which Dortin decided not to reply.

"Seems like—" He was pointing his finger in a direction where the echo from his voice was smallest, but neither of them could see that in the darkness, of course. "Seems like there's a long passageway in that direction. I think our only option is to check it out." He pointed in the opposite direction with his other hand. The passage seemed to be a straight shot. That was just his intuition, of course.

He waited for a moment, but there was no response from Volkan.

Dortin elaborated, feeling a little nervous. "A passageway generally leads somewhere, right? So I think we might be able to get out at the end of it. I think it might actually have been lucky that we fell down here... probably." He wasn't going to say "It's all thanks to you, Brother" even if his life depended on it. However...

"Mm. And since it's all thanks to your brother, to express your gratitude, you may offer some 90% of whatever food you next encounter to me."

"...Sure..."

And so the two of them set off in a random direction in the underground of Kimluck.



"...So, that's that..." Finishing his tale, Orphen sighed, with exhaustion and a sense of loss in his heart. His headache was still going strong. It throbbed unpleasantly, leaving him with a sudden craving for applesauce.

The cave that he suspected Azalie had created was warm enough thanks to her sorcery, but there was a chill breeze coming from the water nearby, as well.

The cavern wasn't too big, but it wasn't so small that the two were forced to

huddle together, either. Deeply grateful for that, Orphen observed Azalie, seated across from him. She returned his gaze, her form half-illuminated by light reflecting off the lake.

Only half of her face was in the light. He could see one of her hands, pressed to her head above her ear. Only one of her eyes was shining.

“What do you think...” She made only the slightest shift in her expression—just the faintest narrowing of her eyes. “...sorcery is?”

Orphen looked into her eyes and gave her a quick answer. “It’s using your magic power to manifest your desired phenomena in a limited area.”

“I think it’s using the most direct method possible to produce a miracle,” she said with a slight chuckle. Then she added, “What do you think Master Childman said it was?” She didn’t wait for Orphen to answer. “He said it was the whims of the gods.”

“Have I been abandoned by the gods?”

“Your answer is the most accurate, I think,” she admitted readily, then shifted her head. She looked back into the cave, which covered her whole face in shadow. “We sorcerers possess magic power. The sense we use to change the world. With this power, we can essentially create a world. That’s what we call ‘compositions.’ When we create a composition, it acts like a second layer of the original world. And with two layers, one of the two becomes unnecessary. We use that opportunity to reject the original world. Because the composition, which we accept, is created according to our ideals. And those ideals then become the effect of our sorcery.”



“All sorcerers know that.”

“But it’s for that reason that sorcery is so weak when other people’s ideals factor into those miracles... That’s why you can’t really wish to kill someone or make it so they never existed. I mean, all sorcery can do is create a phenomenon that’s likely to kill someone... it doesn’t bring death directly. Anything that crosses that line is in the realm of mental domination...”

“I told you I know that!” Orphen snapped, hitting the ground. Azalie jumped, and that made Orphen realize... *She doesn’t want to talk about this...*

However, she quickly continued, “I hate the word ‘subconscious.’ People generally tend to believe in a subconscious state, and some people use that word to escape blame. That itself is subconscious, probably.” Azalie’s commentary suddenly changed subjects. Her face was still hidden in shadow. “But if the subconscious really can overcome the conscious... I don’t want to believe it, but...”

“What are you getting at?” Orphen asked, confused.

She shook her head. As the light and shadow changed places on her face, he could see her expression for a split second. “You’re divided.”

“Divided?”

“I’ve been wondering about it since you tried to use sorcery back up there.”

He couldn’t see himself in her eyes, but she was looking at him.

“You’re forming a composition to kill yourself. Without being conscious of it. But there’s no meaning in wishing for a miracle that kills yourself. Miracles can only occur when you wish for them, so you’re creating a paradox by wishing to kill yourself. Sorcery may be able to overcome the laws of nature, but the meaning of the act is still important. The miracle it creates still must be logical.”

Suddenly, Azalie’s form disappeared. No, Orphen had just closed his eyes. He didn’t feel anything. Not from her explanation. She was just presenting her own commentary on him.

What filled him with despair was when he saw her eyes. Her brown eyes, not reflecting him.

Orphen swallowed, then groaned. "...So I'm... so disgusted with myself for killing that Death Instructor... that I'm subconsciously trying to kill myself?"

"I don't think that's it," Azalie said quickly with a short sigh. "The reason you can't forgive yourself is because you weren't able to control yourself, right?"

"I—" He started to stand, then stopped. He almost felt like someone was holding him down. "I..." Even his words cut off partway.

"Are you sure you don't have any idea what I'm getting at?" Azalie asked without looking at him.

"I couldn't become a Stabber! I didn't want that! It would mean... It would mean killing you." He tried to scream, but his voice came out a raspy whisper.

She had her eyebrows raised, puzzled, as if she didn't hear him, but he thought his meaning had at least gotten across.

Orphen quickly continued, "I always had suspicions... But it was only the slow Krylancelo who didn't realize that Master Childman was training me as an assassin who could kill white sorcerers. You knew that too, didn't you?! That I was being trained to kill you. Yeah, that's right. And what scared me most was... if Master was thinking that, then I would end up killing you for sure..."

"So you're admitting that now?"

"I should have admitted it sooner. I took a hell of a long time getting here. But I wanted to believe in him. That there was no way he'd be thinking that."

She had nothing to say to that. She just silently stood. The ceiling was low, but it wasn't so low that she couldn't stand.

Orphen stood as well, lowering his hips slightly and clenching his fists. "No... I probably didn't actually believe in him. But I still had a way out. I just had to not become a Stabber. I just had to not kill anyone. If I didn't kill anyone, then I wouldn't kill you. But I killed someone. I murdered him. It wasn't an accident. I ended his life in one blow when I didn't have to, meaninglessly. I couldn't stop myself. I did it with my own will, with my own power."

"You're going to kill me? Why?" Azalie asked. Unlike Orphen, she wasn't in any sort of stance.

He couldn't bring himself to look up at her, but he was sure that she was looking at him now.

"I never knew why I was here before. Why I had to come here, to you." He bit his lip and clenched his fists harder. "But I finally know, now that I'm alone with you."

"Why you're going to kill me?"

Orphen looked up when she asked him a second time. This time, he could see himself reflected in her eyes. His expression, hardened in resignation.

He took a breath. His lungs quivered when they took in fresh air. "Because... with no way out anymore, the only way I can go is forward." He took a step. In the small cave, this brought him close enough to reach her.

She won't counterattack... She probably won't run, either. Orphen was sure of both of those things. She'd lost her way out a long time ago, too.

As Azalie stared straight at him, Orphen told her, "In the end, this must be what I came here for..."

He opened his fist. Swinging his hand back, he slapped the side of Azalie's face.

With a short but sharp sound, her head snapped to the side. She hadn't taken a step from where she stood. Her only reaction to the impact was to turn her head and close one eye.

The silence after that was lengthy.

Orphen stood, feeling the sensation remaining on his hand after slapping her, but eventually, he fell to his trembling knees. Crumpling in on himself, he shook his head.

"—ome, Azalie..." His voice was a hoarse whisper. He shook his head again and squeezed out, "Let's go home, Azalie. We still can. Tish is waiting for us. If you go home, I'll go, too. We can't go back to how things were five years ago, but we can make something close to it."

"We can't," Azalie said simply.

Orphen shook his head again. "We can!"

“We can’t.”

He looked up and found her staring straight down at him.

“Maybe that’s enough for you, but it’s not for me. I can’t go with you. Sorry to make it sound like I’m dumping you or something, though.”

Orphen looked up at her as she spoke. Grinding his teeth, he asked, “Is it Master Childman...?”

“Frankly, yes. If he’s not there, it’s no home for me.”

“Are you crazy? He’s... dead.”

“I know. I’m not the same as you... No, I am. That wasn’t an accident either. I killed him by my own will. So I need to take responsibility for it. Isn’t that right?”

“Are you going to die?! I won’t let you...”

She went silent there. But a few moments later, she said something completely unexpected. “The problem you’re having is with your spirit. The spirit isn’t some inviolable thing... but hurting or healing it is difficult. Much more so than the body. It’s not quite the same as your mind, either.”

“Changing the subject again?” Orphen spat out, but she wouldn’t rise to his provocation.

She looked at him, eyes perfectly calm, and smiled. “You said things have changed, Krylancelo. *Everything* has changed since then. It truly has. You think we can make something like five years ago? Impossible. You understand that, don’t you?”

She might have been right. Orphen knew that. Knew it well enough to cause him pain. So he had no way to argue against her.

Azalie went on, “Your heart has gone back to how it was when you were Krylancelo... when you were just a boy. And you’ll stay like this unless you can get back the progress you’ve made since then.”

Orphen lowered his gaze. He closed his eyes. But he could still hear her.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to help me. Because I’m probably the biggest reason you’ve gone back to being Krylancelo...”

He could barely hear her at the end, but he didn't miss what she said. And from the sound of her voice, he started thinking something stupid. Was she crying? He didn't have the courage to look up and check.

"Do you..." This was the last thing she said. "...not need me anymore...?"



The space was called the Poet's Chamber.

There was no meaning in the name. Maybe whoever had decided upon it just didn't like the sound of "Goddess's Chamber." He could see the pope thinking that...

Quo Vadis Pater put his foot on the rubble of the gate and looked out over the vast subterranean lake. Its dark surface rippled faintly. His skin prickled with the cold air that rose from the water. No... He corrected himself. The cold air couldn't make it all the way up here. It was something else that was chilling his skin...

He raised his eyes. There was a woman far out above the water. The most foolish woman in history—and not just Kieselhiman history, but history long before that.

She just hung there, green hair hanging down behind her, limbs limp. Her neck in the grip of a hand extending out from nothing. The woman would not move, but she also would not die.

Quo chanted the Holy Words in his mind.

We who inherit the holy blood of the progenitor Ymir. But was that blood truly holy?

We of noble birth. Should we really have been born?

We of righteous destiny. Who wove that destiny?

We of holy death.

He looked up silently at her.

"Quo."

Quo turned around when his name was called. He had no reason to be

flustered... but there was sweat on his palms.

He found a woman of about 30 standing there, though she didn't look it, of course. She looked more youthful than any other woman Quo knew, in fact. Not in that she looked youthful... rather, as if she denied the concept of aging.

She had a sword in hand, which was rare for her. It was Carlotta Mausen. "Nice work guarding the place," she said teasingly. And with that relaxed air that he'd never been able to trust, she continued, "I've got information on the fugitives. From a subordinate. I'm thinking I'll go out and greet them."

"Go, then," Quo said to her, and looked back out over the Poet's Chamber.

But before he could turn completely away, she told him, "His Holiness granted me His words." Her voice was cheerful. Needlessly so.

Quo understood the reason for her cheerfulness without having to think about it. He didn't recall Carlotta being allowed to have audiences with the pope. If she did so and she was still alive, it meant the pope had forgiven her...

When he didn't say anything in response, she went on, "He requests your presence immediately... Quo Vadis Pater."

Chapter X: Master

It was a house Salua Solude knew well. But it wasn't his house.

There was nothing to complain about. Both the interior and the exterior were without flaws. Though the layout had been designed by an architect who had some screws loose. The full estate was separated into three buildings, all connected by half a floor. That was the reason there were no supports anywhere. The floors all supported other floors. But, though the man who'd drawn the blueprint ate a glass and bled to death just after completing it, the building drawn from that plan hadn't collapsed in the last 50 years. *Isn't that just perfect?* Salua thought to himself.

There weren't a ton of rooms in the mansion, but the ones that weren't personal rooms were rather large. That was just how it was for a family that had had generations of instructors in it. They could never have enough great halls and reception rooms. This period, with the long rains that only came once a year, was the only time the mansion's constant stream of visitors ceased. Those on errands for the cathedral office, their families, other Head Instructors with too much time on their hands, their families, the faithful who had to constantly be hearing sermons to maintain their equilibrium, their families...

"Why's nobody here?" Salua asked his brother, holding the sword the man had given him. He was looking around the room as he dried his hair with a towel.

They were in his brother's study. By no means a small room. Unlike the rest of the mansion, which was white, white, and white, this room alone had a red rug. It was an extremely high-grade item, much older than the mansion itself, but it wasn't comfortable to the touch. A crimson color with no irregularities spread out underneath them. Sand packed into every gap of the red fiber, giving it an added gold luster evenly throughout.

There were bookshelves on both sides of the room, all stuffed with thick books other than the one in the back left, which had trophies and things like

that displayed on it. For stickball, sport fencing, live fencing, lariat, cooking contests... a list of achievements that had no logical connections. Everything that couldn't be displayed in other reception rooms was displayed here.

The only thing that they all had in common was that they bore the Solude name. These were awards given to previous generations of the family. Salua's name alone was nowhere to be found on the items.

"All the servants were dragged to the cathedral office. They probably won't be back," Lapointe Solude, the current master of the mansion, told him from in front of a window great drops of rain were beating down on.

The gas lamp on the desk gave the room some faint illumination. The sun had risen completely now, but the thick rain clouds were still casting heavy shadows over the city.

"Quo and Carlotta aren't stupid enough to torture some servants who have nothing to do with this," Salua muttered, squeezing the hilt of the sword he held. There seemed to be a hand imprint on the hard grip. It fit awkwardly in Salua's grip. Its original owner must have used it an unpleasant amount for it to get like this.

The sword wasn't too heavy, but it definitely wasn't incapable of killing. He hadn't drawn it, but he could tell that the blade was thin. Sharp blades that could cut through flesh were overwhelmingly common on this continent, and Salua didn't really like that. It's still possible for humans to move with lacerations, but that's not so when you break their bones.

Fiddling with the sword, he asked, "What's going on in the cathedral right now?"

"Chaos. That about covers it. The damage is too great," Lapointe stated simply. Twisting his face into a wry smile, he added, "We'll have to make another deal with the capital in order to repair it all."

"And our standing gets worse and worse."

"That's what you're after, isn't it?" The wry smile disappeared and Lapointe put his hands together in front of his face. Hiding his mouth, he said, "I wish you wouldn't act like such a spoiled child. I wouldn't want you—my one and only

brother—to regret your actions.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning. One I’ve given you I don’t even know how many times.”

“Probably dozens,” Salua said, spitting onto the rug. He raised both hands and said, “I’ve got my own stuff I want to do. I’ve told you that too, haven’t I?”

“As your brother, I’d really prefer you find some less dangerous hobbies.”

“Hey, I’m a priest now, too! I’ve got enough standing to at least have a debate with you now!” He couldn’t stop himself from shouting.

Lapointe had nothing to say in response, however.

Having absorbed the first raindrops it had in a long time, the rug completely masked the sound of Salua’s footsteps as he turned his back to his brother and walked off. Showing the grip of the sword to his brother over his shoulder, he asked, “When did she come here?”

“This morning. Right before I got called to the cathedral because of your revolt. I hid her in my bedroom. Figured she’d be safest there.”

Salua looked at the sword as his brother answered. It belonged to Mädchen Amick.

His brother’s bedroom was on the third floor. Not just his brother’s, he supposed, but the bedroom of all the previous heads of the family.

Salua walked through the halls, feeling something pricking at his skin. These were halls he was used to walking, but something in the air was different.

Maybe it was the rain. No...

He walked on, that baseless feeling pestering him. He realized he was squeezing the sword in his hand rather hard.

The bedroom was the innermost room of the house. The whole third floor was basically a house in itself. If you wanted to, you could live on just that floor. It had a bath and a shower—not that they could be used all that openly in this town with its constant drought. It had an amusement room and a terrace. All it

was missing was a kitchen.

The rooms were all connected, but they also all had doors to the hall. The bedroom was the room farthest back in the building.

“We of holy blood...” Salua found himself muttering out of habit. He had three steps until he reached the bedroom.

“We of noble birth.” Two steps.

“We of righteous destiny—” He stopped there, one step away from the door.

He gave the door to his right a smirk and muttered, “We of holy death.”

Only that final phrase was inscribed on the door.

We of holy death.

One phrase from the Holy Words, which Salua had heard so many times, he didn’t even have to try to remember them. After reading them, he took the final step forward and opened the door.

It was dark inside the bedroom, thick curtains covering the windows.

Something nagged at Salua. There was no way his brother would have forgotten to open the curtains when he woke up. Even with his servants gone...

He leapt back from the doorway just as something came flying at him from within the dark room.

Salua twisted, recognizing the object as an ornamental plate. The plate whipped out from the darkness and went past him, shattering against the wall behind him.

Flinching from the sharp sound it made (and the price of the plate), Salua dropped Mädchen’s sword on the floor. On top of his foot.

Something else came flying out of the room.

It was a person, and he didn’t even have to look to tell who it was. A woman with messy black hair in leather armor. She was coming at him with her left arm, protecting her right arm, which hung limp at her side... but when she saw him, she stopped, shock in her eyes.

“Salua...?!” she wheezed, voice hoarse.

It all happened in an instant. Salua reflexively kicked up the sword, which smacked straight into the distracted woman's chin, and the Death Instructor Mädchen Amick went careening backwards, posture perfectly straight.

"Ouuuch..."

"Yeah, sorry... You caught me by surprise there." Salua scratched his head as he watched her rub her chin, tears in her eyes.

She glared up at him. "You surprised *me*. And then you hit me."

"Well, what were you so surprised about? This is my house." Salua shrugged and looked down at her.

She was sitting on the bed, sword on her knees. She had the blue cloth she usually wore around her head tied to her apparently injured arm. He'd noticed that she'd barely lifted that arm earlier.

She was wet from the rain and her hair was messy. There was mud on her face, too. Salua glanced around the room and pulled a towel from the wardrobe next to the bed, tossing it to her.

The towel slowly landed atop her head. Mädchen grabbed it and said, "I suppose that's true. It is definitely your house." Twisting her lip into a bitter frown, she continued, "I had nowhere else to run, so I snuck in here and your brother captured me just like that and then threw me into this sickroom or whatever it is."

"So, earlier, were you trying to take my brother by surprise and hold him hostage?"

"No. I just wanted to get back at him a little."

"Well, you had the tables turned on you by me, so I don't think you're any match for my brother." Salua was smiling as he spoke, but by the time he finished, the grin was gone from his face. He sighed and looked around the room. "...True, it does look like a sickroom in here, doesn't it? It's supposed to be a bedroom, though."

The room did look like it belonged in a hospital. White walls, a hard bed. The

windows were large, but with the curtains closed, the room could be dark during the day. The only thing distinguishing it from a sickroom was the fact that it wasn't particularly clean. Not to mention the ever-present sand. That and the set of holy scriptures lined up neatly at the head of the bed.

"If it were a sickroom, that inscription on the door would be pretty ironic."

"'We of holy death'..." Salua chanted, lazily making the holy sign. "It's a legend in my family. The first head died in this room, and the story goes those were his last words. Since then, it's been tradition for the head of the Solude family to die in here. Though whether he can say the verse or not depends on his condition, of course. They say if he says it, his soul goes to Yggdrasil."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Dunno. No one speaks ill of the dead, after all," he told her simply.



Mädchen gave him a quizzical look, as if she wasn't sure if he was trying to dodge the question or not. He smiled at her.

And, as if suddenly remembering something, she said, "Carlotta told me you were dead."

"Well, she's never attended an interrogation in the dungeon, has she?" Salua crossed his arms with a sardonic laugh. "She doesn't know that Quo won't kill somebody if he thinks they've still got information. Although... if he'd left me in there another half a day, I probably would've died anyway. Incidentally, it doesn't matter what I say on my deathbed."

"What do you mean? Er, not the crap about the Holy Words." Mädchen looked up with the towel in her hand.

Salua looked up at the ceiling and took a step back. He leaned back on the window, feeling the rain hitting the glass. "...Krylancelo snuck into the cathedral from underground, right then. Apparently this deep dragon named Leki guided them up through the tunnels."

He combed a hand through his hair, lowering his voice. He had his eyes on the entrance to the room, though he couldn't imagine his brother listening with his ear to the door.

"I wouldn't say I'm sure about this, but... it just might be that our interests align with those of the dragons."

"The dragons?"

"Well, I'm sure it's been a longtime goal of theirs for one of them to lay eyes on the goddess. And they haven't been able to do that for the 200 years since the Church was established... They've gone after people who have had their Final Audience again and again. I mean, MacDougal was this close to contacting a deep dragon, right? He might have just looked into his memories if there was no danger of destroying valuable records, but, if his familiar had been more cooperative, he might have been able to ask MacDougal about the Final Audience. That's what I was waiting for, but then Krylancelo had to butt in. So the guy killed himself." Salua put his hand to his head in the shape of a gun and gestured like he was shooting himself. "Though thinking about it now, maybe

that was fine.”

“But instead of just passively waiting for someone who’s had a Final Audience to come and see them, what if they could just send one of their own to infiltrate the cathedral? It wouldn’t be impossible if they got a strong human sorcerer to guard them... especially if the guy’s the student of someone who infiltrated the cathedral in the past, and even escaped, too.”

“You think that baby dragon’s a sanctuary spy?” Mädchen laughed.

Salua shook his head, face still serious. “I did some research while I was in Fenrir’s Forest. Deep dragons can’t actually think for themselves, because of that curse. They can only maintain their sense of self using sorcery. I heard this from one of those dragons’ familiars, so it’s probably true.”

“The girl, right,” Mädchen said with a smirk.

Salua ignored her and continued. “Deep dragons are all connected with each other through this vast sorcery... and even if they’re not, it’s possible that that baby has some kind of link with one of his kind. Which would mean the dragons’ sanctuary is aware of the Poet’s Chamber now...”

“So, what are you going to do?”

Salua relaxed at Mädchen’s question. He smiled and unfolded his arms. Lacing his hands behind his head, he leaned more heavily against the window, and he muttered, as if it was completely unrelated, “According to Old Man Oleyl... ten years ago, Childman Powderfield had a Final Audience in the Poet’s Chamber, cool as a cucumber. As if he knew exactly what he’d find there.”

The then-unknown Stabber was around twenty at the time—just around the same age Krylancelo was now. Maybe there was some meaning in that. There could be. Either way, Salua felt like he could twist the situation into being fateful somehow. Not that he was going to.

“...Krylancelo’s in the Poet’s Chamber right now. And I don’t know how, but according to Claiomh, the Chaos Witch, who’s supposed to be dead, is there, too. I can’t by any means say things are going according to plan, but it looks like we’ll be able to accomplish our goal at the very least. As for the dragons...” He shrugged as Mädchen looked up at him nervously. “...I’ll leave them be. I told

you our interests are aligned, right?”

“You think their interests align with ours?”

“I do.” He closed his eyes and asserted. “We both want to change the Church from the ground up.”



As the large man entered the room, he found he was so calm it surprised even himself. He couldn't even imagine why, either. After all, he was about to be sentenced to death by the pope.

This went far beyond the realm of a mistake. No matter how Head Instructor Lapointe had sugar-coated it when he made his report to the pope (not that Quo could expect such a thing to happen in the first place), his execution was a certainty at this point. After all, this was the second time he'd let a sorcerer witness the Poet's Chamber in the last ten years.

Still, as he stepped over the girl's corpse lying in the entrance to the room, Quo was incredibly calm. He knew it was a contradiction, but the fact that he could laugh at himself in his mind was proof of his lack of consternation... Had he simply made his peace with it? *No, that's not it...*

He'd run out of cards to play. His choice had been made for him at this point. That's all it was.

“Quo.”

He heard the voice call him from deep in the room, beyond the thin paper barrier in the center. A quiet voice.

Quo Vadis Pater got to his knees as soon as he entered the chapel, making the Holy Sign at his chest. He lowered his eyes and recited, “We who inherit the holy blood of the progenitor, Ymir...”

“Of holy blood,” the man who sat behind the paper partition, Pope Ramonirok, returned the words without budging an inch atop his seat.

Quo lowered his eyes even further. He continued, staring down at the floor, “We of noble birth...”

“Of noble birth.”

He looked down at the floor as if in search of answers from it. As if his gaze could pierce it. But there was nothing written for him there, of course.

Quo lowered his hand from his chest to the floor. "We of righteous destiny..."

"Of righteous destiny."

How many times had the pope chanted the Holy Words, here, in this place?

Haunted by that question, Quo reached his arm behind his back, and...

"We of..." His words stopped there.

Silence filled the space.

Swallowing lukewarm saliva, Quo muttered, "I see you've killed another one, Your Holiness."

"Raising a complaint during the Holy Words, Quo?"

He thought he could hear slight irritation in the pope's words. Forcing the knot in his stomach to settle, Quo corrected himself. "It is a great honor to serve at your side, and I am sure no one would object to giving their life for you. However..."

"That girl..." The pope seemed to be indicating the body lying face-up at the door. Quo couldn't see him gesturing, but he could tell. "...was seeing the pope's face. Quo. You were too lenient. You should have gouged deeper."

The pope's words were dispassionate. "The pope feels he must punish you... but he does not wish for you to misunderstand why. That your pity for this girl outweighs your respect for me shows the frivolity of your heart. Your sin is her shallow wound. That is your greatest flaw."

"That girl's eyes were completely destroyed. I dug out every piece of them with my own fingers. It is not possible that she dirtied your countenance with her gaze. And... a deeper wound would have reached her brain..." Quo spoke softly to the pope, almost in the tone one would use to soothe an infant.

"Human bodies are fragile... unlike yours." Those words were his secret weapon. The one trump card he held. And they seemed to have an effect. The pope was silent.

Quo slowly raised his head. His large, armored frame rose soundlessly from the floor. Quo stood at his full height in the small chapel, facing off against the figure behind the paper partition.

“Did you think your mental domination would work on me, Your Holiness?”

“I knew I should not have allowed you to don that armor. When did you realize? Your Final Audience? Did Aureole put this in your head?”

“No. I believe it to be guidance from God... from the true goddess.”

He lowered his hips. There was a slight groan from a clasp on his sword belt. Quo opened his right hand and grasped the hilt of the great sword on his hip.

He drew the sword in a flash—the huge glass blade emblematic of the Death Instructors. The weighty blade cut through the air with a heavy *whoosh*. He screamed... a meaningless scream of pure emotion. And as he screamed, he whipped his sword into the image of the figure behind the thin partition. The specially hardened glass blade ripped through the paper.

The paper was hard and brittle from many years of absorbing wax, but it did nothing to block the sword, naturally. The glass sword drew an invisible arc in the air, turning that thin paper—that had nevertheless served as a barrier for an incredibly long time—into nothing but scrap.

Pulling his sword back to him, Quo narrowed his eyes. The paper had been torn. Behind it was the pope. The supreme leader of the Kimluck Church, the unparalleled saint, Ramonirok, whose figure had never been seen before... He sat on his throne, chin in hand, green eyes staring back at Quo.

His limbs were unnaturally thin. The way he sat, legs crossed, elbows on his knees, he looked almost like a huge puzzle ring.

Quo didn't spare a moment. He lifted his sword up—and when he brought it down on the pope, it shattered. He'd brought it cleaving down onto the side of the pope's head, and the impact had broken it into tiny pieces.

Fragments of glass danced in the air, more numerous than the sand for a moment.

Quo leapt back. The pope hadn't budged from his seated position. He merely

looked back at Quo, a smirk on his face.

There was no expression on Quo's face. Nothing showing on the surface. He swiftly drew the black blade from his back. Tracing several glyphs over the surface of the inky blade, the sword crumbled—but before the pieces of the blade, separated like a jigsaw puzzle, could fall to the ground, they floated back up, lining up in front of the sword's grip. When Quo swung the grip of the sword, the complex, letter-shaped pieces of blade swung with it, and when he brought the grip down—

The countless blades swarmed down on the pope like a meteor shower.

However...

The pope finally moved for the first time. He simply raised his left hand.

The fragments of blade suddenly stopped as if blocked by an invisible barrier. All the pope had done was raise his hand.

Quo's breath caught. His throat making a strange sound, he gripped the sword harder. And he thought he could feel the power of the sword rising for a moment, but—

With a sharp *snap*, the blades lost their power and crashed to the floor. Like a puppet without its strings.

Quo stood still, looking down at his shattered glass sword and his now powerless Sword of Moord Aur.

It had taken a mere instant. In that instant, the pope should have died twice. But at the end of it, all he'd done was look Quo's way, and move his arm.

The pope watched him for a while, mouth closed, as if enjoying the silence. Eventually, he smiled slightly... "What do you know of white sorcery, Quo?" He slowly closed his triangular, gleaming green eyes and opened them again.

"The ultimate human sorcery... No, perhaps I should say the ultimate solution humans produced for sorcery..." As he spoke, he lowered his left arm. His thin arm. Thin and pale. Unnaturally shaped, only the joints bulging, and with an unnatural luster.

Quo knew what he was. "You mere doll created by the dragons..." he spat,

tossing the grip of his sword to the floor.

Loud laughter filled the chapel. It had come from the pope. Rather, from the doll seated on the pope's throne.

Dragons. Weird dragons, also called Celestials. They had created these artificial humans with their sorcery. No, that wasn't the right term. Celestial dolls had all been created by *modifying* humans.

"What's so funny?!" Quo bellowed. He swung his arm and shouted, "You deceived me—deceived everyone in the Holy City, you doll!"

"You forget yourself, Quo. And your place." Those quiet words were all the pope said in response.

Feeling an almost physical sense of pressure, Quo swallowed the words he was about to speak. The pope's green eyes shone with that same strange luster as his skin.

"...You're right. I may resemble the dolls the Celestials created." The pope smirked, the slit of his mouth opening oddly deeply on his egg-shaped head. "But you still owe me your respect. After all, I *am* still the pope." He recited smoothly, then closed his mouth again.

Feeling left behind, Quo took a step forward. He was not out of weapons yet.

The pope knew that as well. But he showed no signs of moving, merely staring back at Quo. An expression like he was watching a play on his face.

"Worry not, Quo. The pope is not angry. The pope does not anger..." he said, stroking his glistening cheek with his hand.

"I was watching the commotion last night through the network... That man's student came, did he? And you let him get away. Though I suppose that's better than killing him..." The pope snickered.

"This is a perfect opportunity, Quo. I will tell you who I am. I am... Pope Ramonirok." He said this without opening his mouth. "And the first sorcerer of the humans, the Aymankar, who happened upon the Goddesses of Fate..."



The couch was hard, despite its lavish appearance.

Well, this is a priest's mansion, Majic reminded himself, but he was getting pretty uncomfortable after sitting on it for almost an hour. He looked around the room, adjusting his position every few moments. There was a large clock that looked like it had been made from joining together several thin trees, its slightly bent minute hand ticking away slowly. Both hands were about to meet just before the 10.

The windows were foggy, rain pounding against them. The curtains billowed despite the lack of a breeze.

The room seemed like a reception room, but there was an odd lack of furniture for that. Maybe it was their lowest-grade reception room. He could see that.

In one corner of the room, there were five decorative plants just sitting there. All the same kind of tree and all at different stages of growth. One of them nearly reached the ceiling.

The walls were white. There were no stains, but here and there, there were slight marks from the sand. The marks were all even, though, since the sand was always uniformly spread through the air.

While it couldn't be called ideal, it was a fine enough room. A large gas lamp hung from the ceiling. The shade around it was also white. The knee-high table was covered by a white tablecloth.

There was a tapestry hanging on the wall, but it was a simple piece consisting of some geometric patterns, and, frankly, it didn't look expensive. It had probably been mass-produced by a machine. Though something like that might be unexpectedly valuable in this town.

Then there were some items on the table. A small statue of the three goddesses. An empty water pitcher. And a glass that looked like it had been used.

And then... there was Claiomh, doing battle with the locked door...

Majic covered his face with his hand and muttered, "I don't think it's going to open..."

"This is so weird!" Claiomh suddenly stopped rattling the unmoving knob and

turned around as if she'd suddenly thought of something. "Oh yeah, can't you do something? Orphen could unlock doors with sorcery."

"You can't do things you don't know how to do with sorcery."

Claiomh gave him a dubious look.

Majic raised his head and explained, "It's not just, 'I want to do something to fix this thing I don't understand.' You've said when you command Leki to do something, it doesn't always go as you planned, right? I don't know the structure of the lock."

"But Orphen unlocked the door to my sister's room."

"I would guess Master knows how a certain number of locks work. But I don't think he could do anything about a truly complex mechanism. For that, he'd probably have to just blow the whole door away."

"I suppose that's what we'll have to do, then."

"No, I didn't mean you should do that..."

She seemed serious, so Majic got up off the couch and tried to stop her, when...

There was a knock on the door.

Claiomh turned to him quizzically. They exchanged a look, and there was another quiet knock on the door.

A placid voice came from beyond the door. "It's locked... Could you open it?"

"It won't open." Claiomh had Leki on her head and her chest puffed out. She stood as if to intimidate the door, breath huffing out from her nose.

After a short pause, the voice came again from behind the door. "...Use the handle under the knob."

"Heh?" Claiomh's response was oblivious, even as her chest was still puffed out. She dubiously sought out the location specified, and... a few seconds later, there was a *click*.

The door opened soundlessly.

As Claiomh stood there frozen in that same pose, behind her, Majic realized,

“Come to think of it, they wouldn’t put a lock on it that you couldn’t open from the inside.”

“Why didn’t you realize that sooneer?!”

Majic took shelter behind the couch as Claiomh stormed at him, and from there, observed the man who had appeared beyond the opened door. He was a man with a severe look to him. In his thirties? He looked younger at some angles and older at others. He wore white priest’s robes with some subdued ornamentation. Well, if he looked like a priest in this town, then he probably was one, Majic reasoned.

“Are you the sorcerers who infiltrated the cathedral?” the man asked as he entered the room, leaving the door open behind him. His face was pointed at them, but his gaze seemed to be shifted slightly, Majic observed.

Ignoring Claiomh, who was groaning and coming his way, Majic managed to answer, “Yes...”

“Oh?” The man entered the room after making the Holy Sign at his chest. It looked less like he’d done it consciously and more like it was simple custom for him.

When she noticed him enter, Claiomh decided to stop her charge toward Majic and turn toward him. Majic opened his mouth, thinking he probably should say something, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. As he stood there with his mouth half-open, the man gave him a placid smile.

“I am Head Instructor Lapointe Solude... Due to my ancestry, I am the current head of this family, which represents Verthandi.”

It was a roundabout way of saying it, but Majic gathered that he meant he was the master of the mansion. “Head Instructor” was probably a highly ranked priest, but Majic honestly didn’t know much about the structure of the Church.

However... *If he’s a part of the Kimluck Church, then he should hate sorcerers...* Majic told himself, and began to form a composition, just in case.

Trying not to show his caution on his face, he said, “My name is Majic. This is Claiomh.”

“Why are you introducing me?” Claiomh asked something meaningless from beside him, but Majic ignored her. Luckily, just before she could say more—and it looked like she intended to be loud—Lapointe interjected.

With a slightly wry smile on his face, he asked, “So, why are you here?”

“Huh?” was all Majic could come up with when the quiet question was asked.

Lapointe spread his arms slightly in a magnanimous gesture. “You must have known about our Holy City. Then you must also have known that we do not appreciate visits from you. So disrupting our peace is a bit of a breach of etiquette, wouldn’t you say?”

“I, err—” *I was just brought here by my Master.* He swallowed the words he was about to say. He stopped himself so suddenly that there was a bit of pain in his throat, in fact. Enduring the unpleasant sensation of his body temperature spiking and sweat suddenly bursting from his skin, Majic searched for the right words to say. But he was so flustered, he couldn’t come up with anything. He felt like his heart was pounding louder than his voice.

It was Claiomh that saved him from his panic. She held Leki to her chest and pursed her lips, casually saying, “I think it’s weird that there are places we can go and places we can’t.”

“You would consider it burglary for me to enter your bedroom and make a mess of things, wouldn’t you? That’s what you’re doing. I’d like you to understand that.” He was unperturbed by Claiomh’s displeasure. “I don’t know what you think about it,” he told them calmly, “but this is our sole haven.”

Claiomh’s head snapped up at that, either because something he’d said had upset her or because any sort of retort against her would have set her off. “I doubt anyone would come out here if you didn’t tell them not to!” she snapped.

“We—” Lapointe and Majic started at the same time. Majic had been trying to cut Claiomh off, but since he’d also interrupted Lapointe, the conversation paused awkwardly there. Claiomh and Lapointe’s surprised gazes both settled on Majic’s face.

Majic cleared his throat and resisted the urge to take a step back. He

pretended he was brushing his hair back and wiped the sweat from his brow, starting again, “We didn’t... come here to start any trouble with you. And it wasn’t our intent to sneak into the cathedral... we just got lost in the underground and accidentally ended up there. Maybe it was our fault that the place got destroyed and the priests were injured, but... that was because we were attacked first.”

“Injured...?”

Majic was curious about Lapointe’s dubious interjection, but he didn’t stop. Now that he’d taken the initiative, he didn’t want to give it up. *I have to do this... Master’s not here right now, after all...*

He took a breath and continued, “If you want us to leave, we’ll do that. I do think we owe you that much.”

“Majic?!” Claiomh shouted shrilly. The volume was enough for Leki to fold his ears down. “What are you saying?! Orphen’s still—”

“I know! Be quiet right now, Claiomh!” he turned to her and shouted before looking back at Lapointe. “...My Master—one of our companions is still inside the cathedral. Claiomh told me he fell into the underground lake. We can’t leave until we know if he’s still alive—”

Majic stopped there once more, but for a different reason than he had earlier. He’d realized that Lapointe’s expression had changed while he was talking. Even if his voice had been a little stern, he’d always had a relaxed expression on his face, but the man was completely pale now. His jaw was slack, all the tense twitching of his muscles gone, but it was less like he was surprised and more like he’d fallen into despair somehow.

I’ve seen a face like that before... Majic could picture the memory clear in his mind. It was what his mother had looked like when she’d spent half a day making a special cake and had then slipped and fallen down the stairs with it.

Majic jolted, shocked for a moment by a strange hissing sound. He realized it was Lapointe exhaling a long breath. He was then surprised again at the level of quiet around them for him to be able to hear that.

He decided to look Claiomh’s way. She seemed to be taken aback not by

Lapointe's change but by the fact that she'd been yelled at. She was just standing there blankly like she didn't understand what had happened. He could see Leki in her arms, playing by dangling his tail in front of his eyes.

When he looked back at Lapointe, the man seemed to have come back to his senses in that short time. His face looked more like it had before—just, his gaze was even sharper now.

"...So, you're trying to go through the proper channels now, but by your standards..." He did seem to be trying to continue the conversation, but they could all tell his voice sounded distracted.

"What do you mean?" Majic asked cautiously.

"I mean, from our standpoint, you have already committed unpardonable crimes. However..." He fiddled with the collar of his robes before continuing. "It's reasonable to desire to know if your companion is still alive. If you give me some more details, I can try to find out. It seems my information is rather inaccurate, after all..."

"Why don't you leave it at that?" The air in the room suddenly froze as an unexpected voice cut in. They all looked toward the open door to find Salua leaning in the doorway. He'd changed out of his bloody priest robes into a dark green sweater and some loose black pants. They were likely his casual clothes, but when he wore them inside a grand mansion like this, he looked like some sort of intruder.

Salua spun a small key—the key to this room, probably—on a keychain in his hand, looking at Lapointe with a mischievous expression on his face.

Lapointe's face, however, was cold. "I think I would prefer not to be ordered around in my own mansion."

"Unfortunately, I'm speaking right now in my ranking as an unofficial priest of the Kimluck Church, a Death Instructor. Only priests trained as Death Instructors are allowed to interact with sorcerers who infiltrate the Holy City, much less interrogate them. I believe this rule was decided by your people at the cathedral office, no?"

But Lapointe hardly reacted to the words. Unconcerned, he asked, "You

haven't forgotten, have you? Those very Death Instructors are after you right now for revolting."

"Ah, but they're not after my death. They want to interrogate me. So until I'm run through with Quo or Carlotta's sword, I'm only a suspect. And just being suspected doesn't strip me of my standing as a priest. That's what the law says..."

"Sophistry."

"Yep. Learned it from the best." Salua shrugged teasingly and tossed the key he was holding over to Majic.

It drew an arc in the air and Majic caught it. He heard Salua groaning at the same time.

"Honestly, could you not guess why I locked the door? Why would you go and open it? If you don't use it to think every so often, that brain of yours is gonna leak out of your ears." He beckoned them over without waiting for a response.

"Wh-What?" Majic asked, thinking that Salua would berate him for not thinking on his own again, but the Death Instructor gave another shrug instead.

"It's an emergency. We gotta do it fast, but we still gotta prepare."

"Huh?"

"Come on, let's get some weapons for you two. The cathedral's probably crawling with security right now."

Majic's eyes widened and he looked to Lapointe, figuring the man would have some fierce objections to the idea, but he didn't even seem to have heard his brother. He was looking down with his eyes wide and his shoulders trembling. Majic wasn't sure how long he'd been like that, but he felt an instinctive fear looking at the priest.

"Huh? Weapons?" Claiomh chimed in, voice oddly cheerful as she headed over to Salua. "What kind do you have? I don't want axes or anything like that. I mean, those are just carpentry tools, right?"

"...I'm not sure that I'd say that," Salua ventured a reply and Majic headed over to him, too.

As he passed the couch and walked by Lapointe, he heard the priest muttering, “What is... happening...?”

“...This is your room, isn’t it?” Claiomh asked, eyes narrowed.

“How could you tell?” Salua stuck out his tongue jokingly.

Behind the two of them, Majic had a hand to his temple. He was feeling a bit faint.

The room was something else. The first thing that had greeted them when they’d opened the door was the smell of oil... it smelled like crayons dissolved in water. It was surprisingly large and filled with easels and canvases. The canvases were all smeared with tacky colors arranged in such a way as to form nude figures. Majic was hesitant to call them “paintings.” Some of the figures looked like crosses between humans and some other sort of creatures, but he decided he shouldn’t point that out.

The canvases drew the eye more than anything else, but also scattered around the room were skateboards, magazines, tuning forks (there were no instruments that he could see), and things like collapsible ladders. The bed was shoved into a shadowed corner for some reason and the foot of it seemed lower than the head. When Majic looked closer, he could see that the bedposts at the foot had been manually shortened.

Noticing Majic staring that way, Salua provided, “I can’t sleep unless my head’s higher than my feet,” without being asked.

“Uh huh...” Majic elected to reply.

The chaos didn’t lessen when they stepped into the room. In fact, the only feeling the space gave Majic was regret. He didn’t consider himself the type to keep his room particularly tidy, especially after losing his mother, but this room was defying even the basic concepts he had in his head of “messy” and “neat.”

Knitting her brow, Claiomh pinched some sort of blue object between her fingers and lifted it up, asking no one in particular, “...What is this?”

“Oh, that?” Salua was quick to answer. “I had some jeans I wasn’t wearing anymore, so I started using them as a rag and they ended up like that. I guess

they got kinda oily.”

“...Uh huh...” Claiomh dropped the object with an emotionless (which was rare for her) comment.

It might be best not to touch anything that they couldn’t identify, Majic thought with a sigh.

“Well...” Salua spread his arms, sounding oddly prideful. “It’s a room that’s full of youth, wouldn’t you say?”

“You might also say it’s a graveyard of life.”

“Clever,” Salua had to admit with a wry smile.

If he had to agree with one of them, Majic would side with Claiomh. He glanced at Salua and, rubbing his nose, which was itching because of the sand in the air, asked, “So... the weapons?”

“Right. Well, not like I forgot about that...” Salua kicked aside some of the junk on the floor and walked into the center of the room. But then he suddenly turned around and raised a finger in the air. “But, wouldn’t you say it’s youthful to treat things that should be important to me so roughly? I’m so young.”

“The part where you keep talking about it is what makes you most seem like an old man,” Claiomh said with frightful honesty.

Deflating slightly, Salua returned to the center of the room and pushed down a tall pile of books, also tossing aside a bucket labeled “fire protection” and a sand brush, and pointed at the floor. “Here we go.”

Majic approached with Claiomh, peering down at what looked like a lid in the floor with a handle on it. It was a square about a meter long on all sides.

“An underground room?” Majic guessed.

Salua nodded happily. “Yep. Nicely camouflaged, right?”

“Seems accidental to me,” Claiomh showed no mercy.

Groaning, Salua meekly crouched down and grasped the handle. With a grunt, he tugged, and pulled the door open. After a sound like air flowing inside something, the lid popped up.

“B-By the way, this thing’s pretty complex. It won’t let air into it unless you hold the handle at a certain angle, and it doesn’t open unless you’ve got a certain amount of strength...”

“Why make it so complicated when you could just lock it?”

“One day... One of these days...” Salua groaned with a bitter frown.

Deciding to ignore him for now, Majic glanced down past the opened door. There was a vertical shaft into the underground room, a rope ladder hanging down in it. It didn’t look too deep.

Pointing into it, Majic asked, “...You really dug a hole like this?”

“Don’t be stupid. I didn’t make it.” Salua shrugged and shoved Claiomh, who was sticking out her tongue. “I don’t know why, but it was here from the beginning. I think the guy who designed the place just liked underground rooms. He built them into the place without putting them on the blueprints. So I figured, if it’s there, I should use it. It’s a nice little storage space.”

“Come to think of it, my father also loved underground rooms,” Claiomh piped up.

Unsure how to respond to her, Majic decided not to.

Fixing the door in place with a clasp, Salua said, “Well, humans probably get their love of underground spaces from the Celestials who loved the same thing... Come on, no more chatter. Let’s get in here.” He descended the ladder as if in a single leap.

After a moment, there was a scraping sound, and the pitch-black underground room lit up. Majic looked down into it again. It wasn’t that deep. As he peered down into it, eventually Claiomh started heading down the ladder, Leki on her head.

“Weapons, eh...? But knowing Salua, they’ll probably be some really shoddy or crude things,” Claiomh muttered as she climbed down.

Left alone in the room above, Majic took a breath. He looked over to the window. He could still hear the rain outside.

As the rain pounded at the window, fogged it up, and wiped it clean, he

figured it would still go on for some time.

Rain.

Water...

...*Master*...

Majic imagined Orphen falling into an underground lake... but he hadn't actually seen this lake for himself. Or the female sorcerer who had saved him.

I was taken out before I could even do anything, huh? He put a hand to his chest. Not only was he not wounded, there wasn't even a scar or anything. Even though, while she might have been exaggerating somewhat, Claiomh had told him that he'd been fatally injured. To have healed him to this extent, that sorcerer woman must have had considerable power. Forget "above average"... her power was probably on an entirely different scale than his.

Which means she's as strong as Master, or even stronger... Maybe there are actually a lot of people out there who are at that level... He ran a hand over his face to try and focus himself. *But if I work hard, I can count myself among those people... One day...*

"Majic, get down here already!"

Thunk!

Majic's meditations were cut short by something flying up from the underground and striking him in the face.

"...What is this?" Majic held the horse carved out of wood in one hand as he descended the rope ladder.

As he'd suspected, the room wasn't too far down. When he looked up, he could still see most of the ceiling of the room above. Reaching the bottom of the ladder, he realized the room he was in wasn't that spacious either. Still, each wall was four or five meters, so it wasn't too small.

Claiomh was waiting at the bottom next to the ladder. She put a hand on her hip as he reached the bottom and declared, "It was just sitting here, looking nice and easy to throw."

“Don’t just toss around people’s keepsakes...” Salua groaned pathetically from the back of the room.

Claiomh turned toward him and stated plainly, “If it’s a keepsake that’s in storage, it can’t mean much to you.”

“I just thought it wouldn’t get broken or dirty down here!” Salua retorted, but Claiomh ignored him and turned back to Majic.

As her head changed directions rapidly, Leki sat atop it, looking about curiously.

Of course, just because she was now faced his way, it didn’t mean she had anything to say to him. She just happily said, eyes sparkling, “I’m relieved, though.”

It was immediately obvious to Majic what she was relieved about. The underground room, when compared to the room above, was so organized it was like a miracle had occurred there.

There were spears of various sizes hanging on the wall. Swords and shields were divided between two shelves, and there was even some metal armor (though it was rusted). There were a decent number of smaller pieces of armor, like gauntlets and protective plates, and a wide array of weapons, all organized easily so that they could be identified at a glance.

When Majic looked back at Claiomh, she was already making her way over to the swords.

“...The walls are made of wood.” Majic remarked on something he’d noticed.

Salua, who was eyeing the armor on the other side of the room, responded without turning around. “Well, the outside’s made of metal, of course, but it’s dark down here. You wouldn’t want to fall and hurt yourself, so the walls and floor are wood on the inside.”

He looked up and, sure enough, the ceiling looked like it was made of steel. Though it was also dark, so it was hard to tell. The only light was a lantern on the floor that Salua had probably left down here.

Claiomh suddenly exclaimed, “Oh♪ This is pretty nice, isn’t it?” She had an old

longsword in her hand. There were already some dozen swords lying at her feet... rejected, apparently.

Claiomh swiftly drew the blade and held it closer to the light. It looked a lot like the sword she'd brought from home. The silver blade shone almost gold in the orange light of the lantern. It was thin, sharp, and double-edged, which was rare for a blade of this type. The blade had a gentle curve and a slight swell to it, and its luster looked beautiful even to Majic's untrained eye.

Salua whistled, the sound echoing in the underground room. "You've got a good eye. That's a good blade."

"Is it?" Claiomh put the blade back in its sheath, clearly in a good mood after receiving the compliment.

Salua smirked, holding some sort of armor in his hands—Majic guessed it was a piece of leather you wore over your stomach. "It's called Slake Thirst... a one-of-a-kind item crafted by one of the modern greats, Corelli Callapse. It's what's called a magic blade, with quite a history.

"A magic blade?!" Claiomh exclaimed in surprise. She took another good look at the sword and then asked, "So this thing has some sorta magic power? Like the sword that guy, you know, the big one with the nasty-looking face, was using earlier?"

"I assume you're talking about Quo... I think you and Carlotta are probably the only people who have the guts to talk about him like that, so I'll give you a reward."

"Er... That's okay, I'm good..."

"I know. But the reward will be explaining your misconception. You're wrong about... well, two things, technically, but really only one." Salua raised a finger and wagged it theatrically.

Claiomh groaned with annoyance. "What do you mean?"

"Well, just listen. Your first mistake: swords with actual magic in them could only be created by Celestials—and Corelli is human. The second thing: 'magic blades' don't necessarily have to have actual magic in them..."

Salua put the leather belt he was holding back into the box it had come from and took a step forward, giving them a wink before he began his lecture. “Magic blades are created by human will.”

“Will?” Majic asked without thinking.

Salua pointed at him and continued, “That’s right. I said it had a history, right? The person who uses the sword... how they use it... the age it was used in... the environment where it was used... All these things fade with time. Its wielder eventually dies. If their techniques aren’t passed down, then those are lost to time. The age eventually changes, and the environment may change with it. But all these things get packaged together as legend.”

“This is all sounding very abstract...”

“Come on, just listen. So, what gets left behind, then? The legend, and the object that the legend is attached to: the sword. Those are the kind of things people call ‘magic blades.’ Whether or not there’s actual magic involved has nothing to do with it.”

“So basically...” Claiomh peered up at the ceiling, lost in thought for a moment, and by the time she looked back down, there was clear displeasure on her face. “...it’s just a regular sword there are exaggerated rumors about?!”

“That’s not all it is. The fact that there are legends about it is proof of the quality of the thing,” Salua said with a shrug. The light from the lantern threw a large shadow on the wall behind him, making his shrug look even more exaggerated.

“There are tons of legends about magic blades. The Aurora Circle, the 94 Days, the Carnival... and they all might have the sort of abilities their legends describe. Like nicks in the blade sealing up on their own, or poisoning their victims when they cut them. Skilled craftsmen could have created blades with those sorts of effects. But there’s no way to know for sure unless you use the blade yourself.”

As he explained, Salua strolled over to Claiomh. He passed by her and glanced at the shelf with the swords on it.

Claiomh had her mouth hanging open as his explanation went on, but Majic

tried to do some actual thinking on his words. *But... Doesn't he just mean...*

Salua had a neutral look on his face.

Claiomh groaned, looking at it, and said, "So people are just being fooled by stupid rumors."

"I don't think it's stupid. Incidentally, that blade got its name when the smith handed it over to the man he forged it for and told him to slake his thirst with it."

"Sounds fishy..." Claiomh took a step back like she found the story alarming. Leki just yawned atop her head, though. Holding the sword to her dubiously, she nevertheless said, "Well... I like the shape of it, though, so I'll take this."

Salua turned around and gave her a smirk. "That's fine. Don't worry about the legends. Swords are just tools in the end. That's what I mean when I say human will creates magic blades. All you gotta do is swing it around until it breaks." He looked over the shelf and plucked another blade from it.

This one was a shortsword about 40 centimeters long, in a black sheath with some subdued ornamentation. As he picked it up, his eyes gleamed with excitement. "Slake Thirst and this blade are the two treasures of the Solude household."

He held the sword out without drawing it from its sheath. Then he swiftly rotated it and grasped the end of the sheath, pointing the grip at Claiomh.

"This one's got no name... but Krylancelo might know of it. I'd like to give it to him. Will you do that for me?"

"Krylancelo... You mean Orphen?" Claiomh asked, accepting the sword. She tried to draw it from its sheath, but Salua stopped her.

"Krylancelo's the only one qualified to draw that blade."

"...I promise not to make fun of you anymore—" Claiomh muttered, taking her hand off of the grip of the blade. "—so could you please just call Orphen Orphen? He didn't want you calling him that either, right?"

Salua gave her a look and went quiet for a moment, but he didn't make any promises. Closing his eyes and turning around, he said, "It was pretty filthy, so

we changed the grip and some other stuff, but nothing's been done to the blade. Honestly, it's nothing important, and it's not worth much either. I'll give it to you for free."

"...What about the Slake Thirst? Is this one expensive?"

"Well, it's not an antique or anything. It's not wildly pricey, but... sure, I'll give you that one, too. But you're gonna have to work for it."

"I know. So? What are you gonna use?"

Salua gave her a big smile, the look on his face saying, "I'm so glad you asked." He headed back over to the armor he was going through earlier. Rooting through it, he pulled out a long, thin object.

It was a sword, much larger and heavier-looking than the one Claiomh had found. A sword in a leather sheath, which he drew in one fluid motion.

The blade looked like it was made of glass.



A longsword with a clear blade. It almost looked like a toy, but Majic could tell by the way Salua held it that it had all the weight of a real weapon. That weight was all the evidence he needed to know that it hadn't been made as any sort of joke. Majic recalled something Orphen had told him once about the glass swords that belonged to the assassins of the Kimluck Church, the Death Instructors.

"I'll use this," Salua said, narrowing his eyes. "Quo got the better of me before, but as long as I have this... I won't lose to him."

Majic watched him slide the sword back into its sheath with the same fluid motion, and found himself raising his voice. "There's no way!"

A moment later, he came back to his senses, realizing that Claiomh and Salua were both giving him surprised looks. In fact, they might have forgotten he was even there. Getting irritated at the extent of the shock on their faces, he said, "Isn't that obvious? It's impossible."

"...What is?" Salua asked him calmly.

Majic stared hard at the Death Instructor. "With or without that sword, we can't beat the man in the armor... right? Only sorcery can fight against sorcery. And sorcery didn't work against Quo. Don't you have any sorcerous weapons like he had? If you don't... and we go to the cathedral again, this time we'll just get wiped out, for sure..."

"Well, I've heard Quo has several... although the only one he's deciphered enough of the glyphs to use is the Sword of Moord Aur." In the dim light provided by the lantern, Salua's barely illuminated face was neutral. It was odd for him to be so expressionless. His face was even free of the usual sardonic grin he had on.

"Either way, even if we could get our hands on one, there's no way to activate the sorcery without deciphering the glyphs. And that could take years, which is more than enough time for Kry— your friend to drown, right?"

For Master... to drown? It was an absurd thought. That's what Majic thought reflexively. Orphen. Krylancelo, of the Tower of Fangs. One of the most powerful sorcerers of their time... there was no way he could die.

“...But... we still...” Majic squeezed the words out, trying to find some way to hide how much his knees were shaking. He could hear his lungs making some strange sound. “We still... shouldn’t go yet... I think.”

“What are you saying?!” Claiomh shouted.

Majic had been expecting that, but he still felt himself freeze.

She continued to shout in that shrill voice of hers, which he really didn’t want to be listening to in this confined space. “Even now, we’re taking too much time. Didn’t I tell you if we don’t hurry, Orphen’s gonna be in trouble?!”

Something cold burst inside Majic’s head. “I know!” he shouted back to her, as loud as he could.

The voice of a sorcerer, who does vocal training to better use his spells, is nothing to scoff at. When he brought the full force of his voice to bear against Claiomh, he saw her shrink back, grimacing. Salua’s expression, however, didn’t budge.

It wasn’t that that annoyed him or anything, but Majic turned to Salua nonetheless and yelled at him some more. “That’s just my opinion! If we’re going to save him, then we have to at least bring something we can use to defend ourselves, or it’s pointless! Master is a powerful sorcerer—much more so than me. He won’t die so easily. He won’t! Master won’t die!”

There’s no way... He repeated in his mind, even stronger than he’d shouted.

He pictured Orphen in his mind. In his dim vision, his master stood. Watching him. Fist at his side, right leg slightly behind his left.

He approached. As he’d done thousands of times before, he produced the same results now. He drew closer, and a split second later, Majic was down on the ground.

He would never go down. Not from where Majic watched him.

“He won’t... die...” He wanted to shout again, but the voice that came from his mouth was faint.

The lantern light danced, making the shadows of countless weapons in the underground room sway on the walls.

Claiomh's face was red, and she looked like she wanted to shout something, but Salua pushed her aside and said coolly, "Well, it's a sound argument..." Claiomh looked his way and Salua scratched his cheek, smiling faintly. "There's not really much more we can do to prepare."

"We can't just go to our deaths—"

"Well, you're not going, so just gimme a break."

"...Huh?" was all Majic could say at the unexpected comment.

Salua gave him an apologetic look. "You're staying here."

"Wh—" Majic bent forward and protested. "Why?!"

"Well, 'cause that's what I decided. If we're going up against Quo and Carlotta, there's no way I can protect the both of you on my own."

"Protect...?" Majic let the hand he'd stuck out fall to his side. He glared at Salua, who stood on the opposite end of the underground room, some five meters from him, and said, voice trembling, "What do you mean, 'protect'...? Please don't patronize me. I'm a sorcerer, too... You think you can protect me?!"

"I'd say the same thing to you. I'm a Death Instructor, you know... I specialize in killing sorcerers."

"H-Hey..." Claiomh interjected haltingly, forgetting her own anger in the face of the awkward air between the two men.

But Majic ignored her, and Salua didn't have any reaction either.

Looking the Death Instructor in the eyes, Majic spat out, "Well, you couldn't beat Master."

"He's the greatest Sorcerous Stabber to come out of the Tower. It's hardly fair to compare him to an amateur like you."

"I can cast stronger spells than Master!" he declared, fists clenched, but Salua was unmoved.

"So what?" He snorted derisively.

"So..." While Majic was searching for his next words, Salua continued.

“I don’t know if he was just stupid taking on an apprentice at his age or if his apprentice is just too much of a damn fool, but you’re never gonna catch up to him the way you are now. It’s easy enough to prove it. Want me to?”

“Umm~” The reply came from Claiomh, not Majic. She was biting her finger, looking between the two of them.

Majic was just biting his lip in silence.

Laying his sword at his feet, Salua said, “Come on, it’ll be easy. Just try and take me down. From your expression, it looks like you’re raring to go, but let me give you some advice—you can’t take your enemies down just by glaring at them.”

“Fine!” Majic thrust both hands out. “Fine!” He repeated, beginning to concentrate.

The world came into focus. Magic power let you sense certain things. He thought it did, at least. Maybe it was just a product of the caster’s imagination, but he was too focused to let such things bother him. His magic took control of the world in an instant.

He could see Salua leaning against the wall behind him, a mocking smile on his face. His arms were crossed like he was full of confidence.

He’s not taking me seriously... He started forming a composition as his anger seethed.

A web of power formed in the air around him. He gathered up everything as it was and began to form it into what he desired. Majic’s composition was careful, yet bold. He had no intention of going easy on Salua.

Salua was unarmed—he wasn’t even moving to pick up his sword. However...

In an instant, he uncrossed his arms and raised one up. Then he slammed his right fist against the wall behind him. With a *boom*, a powerful vibration went through the entire underground room.

As if he’d been aiming for it, a short spear fell from right above Salua’s head. It must have been hanging there, concealed by the darkness near the ceiling. It was a throwing spear, 50 or 60 centimeters in length. Short and thick. Its

sharpened tip glinted in the lantern light.

Catching it in his hand, Salua took a step forward, holding it above his shoulder. In the same instant, Majic completed his composition.

I'm faster... I won! With a victorious shout, he chanted his spell to release his sorcery. "I release thee—"

—As his sorcery activated, fatigue assailed him. Unease cut through him like a knife.

If your control were just slightly worse on that spell— It was Orphen's voice. As he watched Salua hold the spear, he could see his master's angry face in place of the Death Instructor's for a moment. —*you would have died!*

No! Master was just jealous of me because he couldn't use his sorcery! Yelling back at the vision of his master, Majic forced his spell to activate.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" He could sense power gathering before his outstretched hand. The flow of the power was on his side.

It gathered at his hand and headed for its target. At the same time, he could feel his strength... not leaving him.

The power wasn't released. The composition dissipated. His thrust-out hand merely trembled fruitlessly... *I messed up the spell!*

His nearly-completed composition went to waste. His shout faded, producing nothing. He managed to raise his head to look toward Salua. He couldn't see Claiomh from where he was standing.

The Death Instructor stretched his arm out to release the spear. Just as a sorcerer would release a spell. The movement was quick, but it seemed incredibly slow to Majic.

I... get it... Even his thoughts seemed slowed now. But it felt surprisingly good. *I understand it now...*

When Salua finished extending his arm and released the spear, his life would end in less than a second. He found that saddening, but he didn't even have the time to shed a tear over it.

He could see the very sharpest point of the spear—its tip.

But just then, Claiomh suddenly appeared at his side. The moment the spear left Salua's hand, Claiomh's small body crashed into Salua's—his form shifted slightly, and in the next instant...

Thunk! There was a dull sound in Majic's ear.

In that incomprehensible moment, Majic was freed from his paralysis and his senses returned to their normal speed. He fell to the floor and looked around. He was certain that he was still alive, so where was the spear...?

It was sticking out of the wall behind him. It had likely missed his ear by mere centimeters...

He couldn't speak or breathe. All he could do was break out into a sweat. Sitting on the floor, Majic groaned, in desperate want of air, but he couldn't take any in.

He heard Claiomh's voice then. "Wh-What are you thinking?! You were seriously trying to hit him just now, weren't you?!" She was shouting at him, but Salua just shoved her off of him with an indifferent expression on his face, walking slowly toward Majic.

He took one step, then two... not very long strides. He quickly arrived in front of Majic and went past him, grabbing the spear in the wall and pulling it out. Then he thrust its tip out in front of Majic's nose as the boy looked up at him.

"Salua?!"

Ignoring Claiomh, Salua muttered, "Why didn't you take me down?"

"Huh?" was all Majic could say, almost like the spear was actually pinning him in place.

Salua clucked his tongue quietly. "I missed with my only weapon—this spear. It should have been easy to take me down after that. Why didn't you do it?"

The idea hadn't even crossed his mind... Majic was frozen, unable to give him an honest answer. He just looked up at the Death Instructor, dazedly watching the smirk slowly return to his face.

"Well, this is—" Salua pulled the spear back and shrugged. "—one of the differences between you and him. But there's plenty more. Not that I want to

bother demonstrating each and every one of them.”

“I...” Majic looked down, unable to stop himself from shivering. He didn’t know what to say, but he could tell that the cold sweat running down his exhausted body was trying to tell him something.

“Well, you don’t need to figure it out right away. Though, if you want to really understand it someday, you’re gonna need that rookie master of yours.”

“...Yes...” Majic managed to squeeze the word out with a nod.

Just then—*thunk!*—there was a loud sound from above. It sounded like someone kicking the door down.

“What the...?” Salua looked up with a shocked exclamation, but by then, there were already several sets of footsteps crashing through the room above, kicking aside junk as they went. They could hear something being dragged. And...

A moment later, something fell down the entrance to the underground room. It was... a corpse.

Claiomh made a sound like a hiccup. It must have been a scream that didn’t quite make it out of her throat.

The corpse was wearing tattered priest robes. Shredded from being cut. They all recognized the body.

“Bro?!” Salua groaned.

And finally...

A jovial voice called out to them from the opening above, sounding extremely out-of-place in their current situation. “Hello~!” A carefree woman’s voice. “It’s time to surrender, kiddo.”

“She’s here... that demon woman...” Salua’s voice, hoarse and bitter, almost sounded like it belonged to the corpse that had dropped down next to them.

Chapter XI: The Razor-Sharp Successor

Mädchen Amick gazed out at the form of the cathedral, blurred by the rain, through the window.

Grey rain fell on the white town, mixing with the ocher wind to become the color of shadow. This view had been the same since long in the past. Long ago... when humans first arrived on this continent.

She stood in front of the window, rubbing her numbed arm. First aid had stopped the bleeding, but the wound wasn't healed and she'd lost a lot of blood. It probably hadn't helped that she'd gotten thoroughly chilled running around in the rain. She could still move her fingertips slightly, but she could tell that that wasn't likely to last.

It might never move again... It was ironic, she thought with a wry smile. Salua had told her that he'd gotten hacked to pieces by Quo Vadis Pater in the cathedral. Meanwhile, she'd taken one soundless blow from Carlotta. Now, Salua was walking around, the picture of health, and Mädchen couldn't even hold a sword anymore.

Maybe that's just the difference between Quo and Carlotta. She had to admit it, vexing as it was.

There was no one who compared to Salua when it came to sword skills. After all, he was the only one who had been personally trained by Oleyl. The only one Oleyl had acknowledged. Quo was the only one who had successfully deciphered sorcerous glyphs, and Name Only had achieved superhuman physical abilities by carving away at his own life force. As for combat experience, Mädchen, who had taken over at a young age for her father after his death, had more than anyone.

Carlotta had nothing. She did nothing. Yet Mädchen had never heard of the woman failing at a single thing.

Ten years ago, a man had infiltrated the Yggdrasil Cathedral. He'd done it

easily, though no one knew how.

At the time, no one knew who the man was. He'd seemed young, but the assassin had also possessed cunning beyond his years. He'd killed several Head Instructors and three Death Instructors, and was repelled by Quo Vadis Pater and Oleyl Salidon just before reaching the Poet's Chamber.

Oleyl was seriously wounded at the time and retired soon after. He was charged with rejecting his sacred duty and was forever banished from the Holy City because of it. That was when Quo was put in charge of the Death Instructors. It was also when Salua began to study under Oleyl.

But Mädchen hadn't been able to pay attention to anyone else at the time. After all, she'd just been selected to fill in the significantly thinned ranks of the Death Instructors. The reason for her selection was simple: one of the three Death Instructors who'd been killed was her father.

She was given nothing but missions outside of the Holy City. The same went for Salua, who joined their ranks a few years later.

...In those filthy lands where there was no sand, I saw this sight—the Holy City soaked with rain—over and over again in my dreams... She put her hand on the window as she thought to herself. Her left hand, which she could still move.

Every time I came back, I cried... I swore to never leave again... this city that my father gave his life to protect... She tensed her hand on the window frame. She felt the creak of the latch more with her arm than with her ears. The sensation of the damp wood. Its surface was stained with sand, but the particles were too fine to give it a rough sensation.

But I stopped crying at some point... She opened the window. The loud sound of the rain made the world outside boisterous.

Drops of rain leapt into the room uninvited. They struck her body as well, but she didn't even think about getting out of their path. She wanted to soak them up. This rain was part of the Holy City, too...

Right around when she stopped crying, she started to hear the name of the man who'd attacked the Holy City. The man who had gained infamy instantaneously by assassinating several Head Instructors of Kimluck—

Childman. In less than half a year, he became Master Childman Powderfield. A teacher at the Tower of Fangs. From his incredible abilities, he was rumored to be on par with Pluto the Demon, the head of the Thirteen Apostles and the strongest black sorcerer on the continent.

Master... Childman Powderfield. And his final student... Krylancelo. The man now calling himself Orphen... According to Salua, he'd entered the Poet's Chamber.

Just outside of the open window, the wind was whirling. The rain fell harder, striking at her face. But Mädchen just watched, keeping her eyes open. She would watch. She told herself that quietly.

I'll watch. I'll watch as this city, which used to make me cry... is overturned...

"The lid that seals the gods inside..."

She must have been tired. She suddenly grew anxious. But she couldn't sleep yet.

Ten years. It had been ten years since she'd become a Death Instructor. Everything she'd learned, she'd learned in battle. How to use a sword, the timing of a sorcerer casting a spell, how to fight, how to run, how to make a simple stove, how to start a fire, how to get bugs out of the sheets in a cheap inn room, how to get something out of her eye with gloves on. How to pray. Even how to love. She felt like she'd learned all that in battle.

"O Goddess... You who spin my fate..." She made the Holy Sign out toward the rain. It was slightly awkward, since she couldn't use her right arm. "I know you have no desire to see my filthy face... But I must see you. It was for you that everyone died. If you spun their death as well, then I must go to you and shout out the name of my father."

She closed her eyes and broke the Holy Sign, touching the blue cloth around her right arm with her left hand.

"All-knowing... all-powerful... infinite. You spin fate and throw it out into every world like a net. A goddess... yet you do nothing." She could hear the wind groaning.

"I love you. Just as my father loved you. But... the continent does not need

you. No one wants to show you their face...”

She removed the cloth from her arm and tied it to her head with one hand, skillfully. She learned how to tie this cloth in battle as well, she thought. The cloth was stained with blood now, dyed an inky purple.



What is happening...? Seated lightly in a chair in his study, Lapointe Solude had his elbows on his desk, repeating that same phrase to himself over and over again. He had his hand on an open book, but he wasn’t reading it.

He stared down at his hands on his desk. The pens in his pen holder suddenly started rattling around and he looked at them in shock before realizing why and sighing. It was because his hands were shaking.

This was no time to be laughing. He knew that. But he wanted to laugh if he could. It was a foolish desire. He knew that, too.

All I can do is pray at this point... He was finally able to smile wryly, with that thought.

Lapointe rose from his chair. He looked at the clock on the wall. 11:00. It was time.

He stood and looked around his study. At the bookshelves lined with valuable volumes. At the trophies—most of them his. At the window. The door.

He pulled open the longest drawer in his desk. It had nothing inside other than a single sword. Just a normal longsword. Gripping the sword’s hilt tightly, he left his study wordlessly.

The rain showed no signs of letting up. All the way from the entrance to the gate, the rain pounded down as if the sky itself was falling. Of course, the rain clouds extended out above the entire Holy City, but to him, the porch he was standing on out to the main gate was his whole world right now.

If he wasn’t leaving from the roof or the underground, he always had to leave shouldering his house on his back. That was what he felt leaving from the main door meant. His house was always on his back. In front of him was either rain,

wind, or sand... and people who resembled those things. They waited for him there now.

He stepped out into the rain falling diagonally to the ground. He felt like he could see something in front of him, hazy as his vision was in the heavy rain.

It wasn't just his imagination. He was sure of it. That woman wasn't one to break an appointment.

The rain fell against his head, his face, his shoulders, his whole body. It was falling hard enough to hurt. There was water in between his fingers as he held his sword as well.

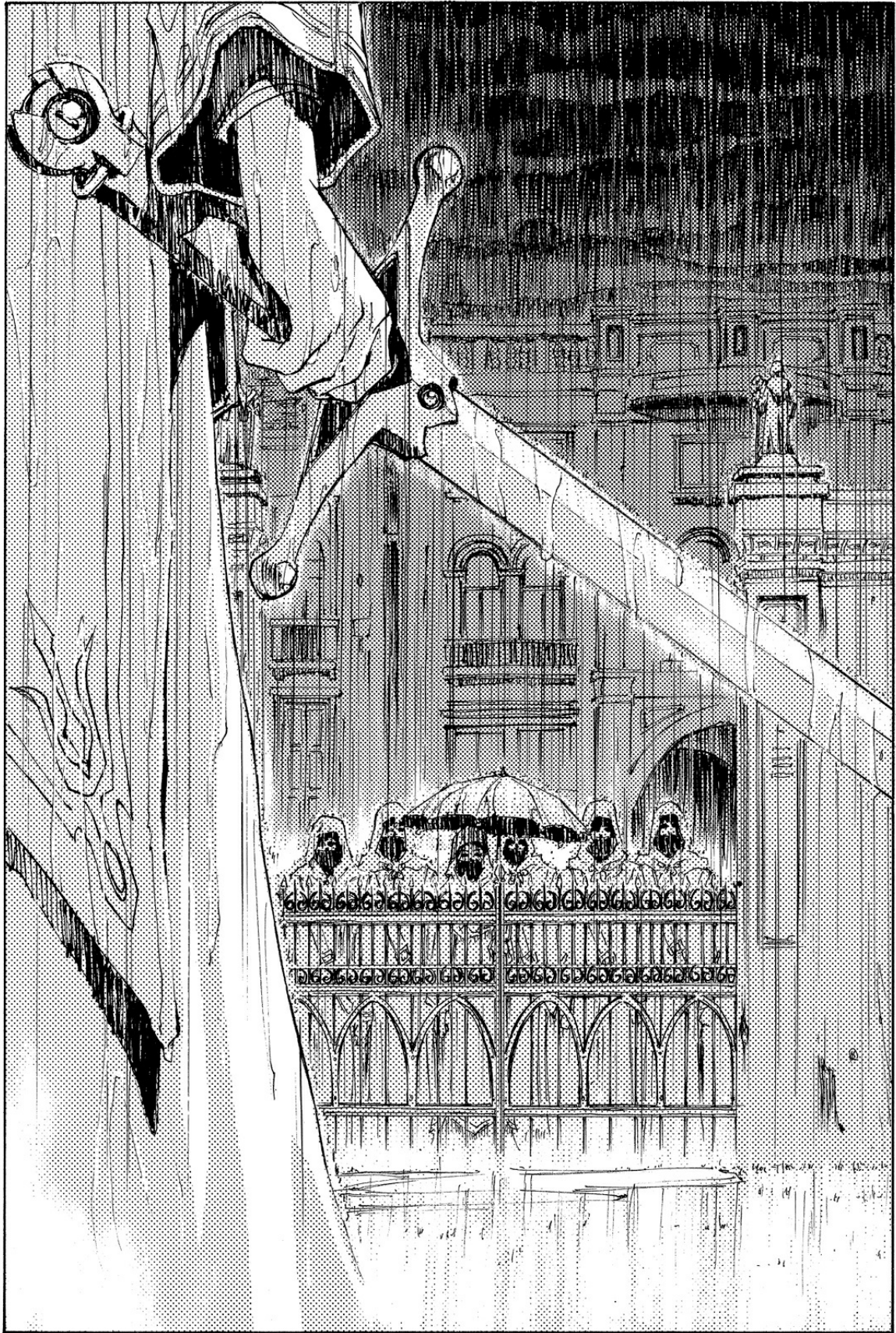
He walked on regardless. Each step carefully measured. Slowly making his way forward.

The gate was still far in the distance—if he took the winding path of stones to reach it, it would take a minute of walking—but he took the shortest route there. Would the gardener be angry at him for stepping on the lawn? Of course not. It would be ridiculous to get angry at Lapointe Solude, Head Instructor.

He walked forward swiftly, eyes narrowed, and eventually reached the gate, where he was greeted with this:

“You’re late. I hope you understand that both of our lives are in danger here.”

“There was no need to come carrying such a conspicuous umbrella then, was there?” Lapointe spat in response.



The umbrella didn't really stand out *that* much. In rain so heavy, it just looked like a faint pink smudge from a distance. It goes without saying that the woman casually holding the girly, fluorescent umbrella and looking his way was Carlotta. But she wasn't in her usual priest robes. Her clothes, at least, were inconspicuous, matching the line of priest soldiers who stood behind her. She was even covering her face with a hood and a mask. Of course, as long as you could see her eyes, it was hard to mistake her for anyone else even with the rest of her face hidden...

"Where are your servants?" she asked blithely, as if she hadn't even heard his remark.

"I gave them the day off. They won't be back until tomorrow."

"I see," Carlotta said lightly, giving a gesture to one of the priest soldiers.

The soldier walked forward wordlessly and put his hand on the gate to open it.

Lapointe swiftly raised his sword and placed the blade above the soldier's hand.

The soldier froze. And not just him. Carlotta and all the rest of them stopped, taken aback. The droning sound of the rain filled the space.

"And just what is the meaning of this?" Carlotta asked without her usual flippancy.

Lapointe could see his wet hair sticking to his eyelids. "I'd like to ask you something before you enter my mansion," he told her.

"This is the Holy City, protected by His Holiness's words. No land here belongs to you."

"Spare me the sophistry. I just had to deal with being scolded for it myself." Lapointe tensed his hand on his sword grip. Some blood welled up on the priest soldier's hand underneath the blade.

"Quo lied," he whispered sharply. "There's a possibility a sorcerer has entered the Poet's Chamber. This must be prioritized above all else. Return to the cathedral and deal with this. You can take that as an order from the Cathedral

Office.”

However... all he got in response was a long sigh.

After the length exhalation, Carlotta shook her head. She narrowed her eyes and said, as if coaxing a cat, “His Holiness is well aware.”

“...What?” Lapointe trembled, and not because of the chill of the rain. Her statement was shocking for two reasons. “His Holiness knows?! No, Carlotta, are you saying you received His Holiness’s words?!”

“Open the gate, Head Instructor Lapointe. If you protest any further, I’ll take it to mean you’re hiding your brother inside.”

Seeing her eyes squeezing closed, Lapointe leapt back with a grunt. He put both hands on his sword at the same time.

Something silver and shining swung sideways into his tightly gripped blade. *Clang!* A shock went through his arms with the sharp sound. He realized the priest soldier he thought he’d pinned with his sword had drawn a blade with his other arm.

Someone kicked the gate and it swung open. Carlotta stayed back while the five priest soldiers swarmed into Lapointe’s yard. They had all drawn their weapons. They all wielded swords with slightly warped blades.

Exhaling a breath that rasped through his teeth, Lapointe hooked his blade around the tip of one of the attacking priest soldiers’ swords and wrenched it from the soldier’s hand. At the same time, he stepped forward, slashing his sword up at an angle. The sword caught on something, and the hood covering the priest soldier’s face was quickly stained with blood. The soldier fell, writhing, to the rain-drenched ground without a scream.

Lapointe was still moving. His eyes darted left and right as he jumped to the side, clashing swords with another attacking priest soldier.

Their swords only met for a moment. The moment his opponent started to push against his blade, Lapointe leapt back, out of his reach. And when his opponent stumbled forward, he brought his blade down on the back of the man’s neck. The neck, covered by a hood, gave a single spasm and then sprayed blood as the man collapsed, unmoving.

“Impressive... You might even be more skilled than Salua.” Carlotta suddenly commended him.

Lapointe looked up to find that the remaining three priest soldiers had taken refuge behind her. She strolled into the yard and took a glance at each of the priest soldiers’ corpses on the ground before lowering her mask from her mouth.

The tip of her tongue peeking out from between her plump lips, she continued, “Why would you do something so stupid, though? Interfering with the interrogation of a Death Instructor, and killing two priest soldiers as well... No matter how high up in the cathedral office you are, you know you can’t get away with this.”

“Why, you ask? I would ask the same of you.” Lapointe could hear his own teeth grinding. He could smell blood mixed in with the scent of the rain. “Betrayal, discord, deception... Are you playing at being spies or something?! You are tasked with defending the Holy City! Just what do you think your sacred duty is?!”

“Well, I wonder.” Carlotta shrugged her shoulders, her expression still easy. “To me, it’s the Holy City that seems like a little playground.”

“How dare you!” Lapointe shouted, and stepped forward.

All he saw was Carlotta smile. But just the lower half of her face. He couldn’t see the top half because she’d lowered her umbrella slightly. He couldn’t understand why she’d done that. Her vibrantly-colored umbrella shook in the rain, and... Lapointe was blinded.

A scream got caught in his throat and exploded in his stomach.

“Aaah... aaaaah?!” He fell to the ground, dropping his sword. His face was hot... there was a numbing pain surging forth from the back of his skull.

With a *whap*, Carlotta returned her umbrella to its original position. Lapointe could hear the sound even under his own screaming, as he held down his left eye, blood gushing from it.

“Y-You...” He groaned, panting roughly. He glared at Carlotta, who was giving him a pitying look.

She looked up unconcernedly and seemed to notice something stuck to the tip of her umbrella. With a frown that made Lapointe certain that she was fond of this umbrella, she folded it closed and swung it sharply.

The piece of flesh stuck to the umbrella fell to the ground. Lapointe didn't need to look to know what it was. It was his eyeball.

"It's too bad." She shook her head and opened her umbrella back up, tone truly regretful. "Since you killed two already, it won't even balance things out to kill you."

Lapointe saw her signaling to the priest soldiers behind her. He didn't even need to guess what the signal meant. He groaned in despair, searching for the sword he'd dropped. It must have fallen in his blind spot. He couldn't find it no matter where he looked.

The three armed priest soldiers approached. Carlotta smiled, not even looking at him anymore.

"...Come to think of it, you don't get to go to heaven unless you die in your own bedroom, isn't that right?" Her voice was jovial, teasing. "It's too bad. You're going to die here."



"Now, the problem is..."

Dortin walked along listening to Volkan's unending chit chat—not that it was anything so pleasant. Groping their way through the darkness was harrowing, but as they walked, they found they were becoming able to see their feet beneath them. Maybe it was just their minds playing tricks on them, but the dwarf brothers walked on in the dark underground regardless.

And there was nothing to do but walk, because the path they were in was completely straight and completely level. It was almost impressive how devoid of anything interesting it was. Thanks to that, neither of them had tripped or anything, but it was also incredibly boring.

Dortin wasn't sure whether to count himself lucky or unlucky. Which in his case was just more of the usual.

“Are you listening, Dortin? I said, the problem is...”

“Uh huh. What’s the problem?” Dortin asked absentmindedly as Volkan continued forward (he could only assume). They had been walking for quite a while now. Dwarves didn’t really get muscle strain as a rule, but they could get tired, same as humans. If he stopped now, his legs probably wouldn’t move again for a half a day, Dortin thought wearily.

But his brother’s voice sounded as if he knew no such exhaustion. “The problem is, say a snake showed up in this passageway; what would we do?”

Dortin didn’t even want to think about that. Of course, since he’d been asked, he couldn’t ignore the question. He sighed and answered, “Well, if there’s no prey for them, I doubt there’s any snakes here, and if there’s lots of prey for them, then their stomachs will probably be full, right?”

Dortin’s attempt to give his brother peace of mind seemed to have succeeded. “I s’pose you’re right,” Volkan said with a nod. Then, a few seconds later, he asked, “Say there’s a bear hibernating down here, what should we do then?”

“I hear bears will stay away if you talk while you walk.”

“I see.” A few seconds later. “An orca would be trouble, though.”

“I guess so.” Dortin decided his brother was probably just bored.

They resumed their journey in silence after that. Since it was hard to tell how much time was passing down there, Dortin wasn’t sure if it was a long or short stretch of silence, but eventually, Volkan spoke up again.

“You know, it just occurred to me.”

“What did, Brother?”

“What are we walking through a place like this for anyway?”

Unable to come up with a diplomatic answer, Dortin decided on, “Well... because we fell, I suppose.”

“Why did we fall?”

“I suppose that’s just how things went with Claiomh.”

“For an unplanned occurrence, we sure ended up in a pretty precarious situation.”

“I thought the same thing.”

“Do you think this is okay? What do you think a juror would say? Everyone would sign off on me feeding that reversed thrust girl a hair growth drug and shaving her to death, right?”

“I think they would probably ask why a couple of dwarves are in a courtroom first.”

“That’s discrimination. Well, those narrow-minded people are just jealous of a great hero like me. That’s the price of fame, you know.”

“I really don’t think that’s it, but okay. It’s not like you’re bothering anyone.”

“Mm. Incidentally, there’s something bothering *me*.”

“What’s that?”

“My head feels like it’s splitting.”

“So does mine. Has for a while now.”

“Well, in my case, it feels like there’s also blood pouring out of it thud.”

“Huh?” Dortin stopped, actually hearing something collapsing in front of him. He walked forward slowly, feeling uneasy.

And his foot hit something. It wasn’t a rock. It was soft. It was a fur cloak he was very familiar with. The same thing Dortin himself wore. His brother was lying on the ground in front of him.

Dortin sat down with a heavy sigh. His tense thigh muscles welcomed the rest. He was glad for the rest, and he was sure his brother would revive in a few minutes anyway.

Geez... I never do have any luck, do I? Come to think of it, something similar happened in that weird theater too, didn’t it? Recalling an unpleasant memory—not that he could think of any pleasant memories when he tried—Dortin was full of regret. That time was really the worst.

Of course, at that time, they’d been trapped in a similar passageway and the

only thing that made it worse was the water torture they were subjected to. Otherwise, they were in pretty much the same situation now. But he really didn't want to realize that.

Of course, thinking I don't want to realize it means I've already realized it. Geez... *Huh?* Dortin pricked his ears up. The passageway was still pitch-black, but he thought he could hear a sound somewhere in the distance.

It sounded like... water.

Flowing water...? Is it drinkable? Dortin quickly stood, exhaustion forgotten, and focused on trying to find the source of the sound. He was parched, a bitter taste in his mouth from the sand he was sure was mixed in with the air, even if he couldn't see it. If he could obtain drinking water, he couldn't ask for more.

For the time being, he grabbed his brother—he wasn't sure if it was his leg or his collar or what—and dragged him along as he walked. The sound was quiet, but it seemed like it was coming from nearby. As he went on, he started to smell the water in the air.

"Ah!" he exclaimed when he put his hand to the wall. It was damp.

Then, *thunk*, something hit him on the head and he stopped.

"What was that?" He reached up and found that the ceiling, which he'd never been able to reach before, was suddenly extremely low. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that the ceiling was collapsed here. And where the ceiling was caved in, there was water dripping down...

As he groped at the ceiling, part of it suddenly came away in his hands. "Umm..." He was left with a piece of stone as big as his head in his hands. Holding it under his arm as he dragged his brother along behind him, Dortin tried to analyze the situation to himself.

It was raining. Like, had been for a long time.

The rain comes, of course, from the sky.

It falls, obeying the laws of gravity.

Even after reaching the ground, it continues to flow down underground.

Underground is where they were.

He tried to estimate, on the low end, exactly how much water had poured down into Kimluck these last few days (he *really* didn't want to think about anything other than the low end).

Glug glug glug glug glug...

The dripping sound from the collapsed ceiling had changed into more of a flowing sound.

"Umm..." Still trying to analyze the situation, Dortin felt the immense spray of water come crashing through the tunnel, hitting his whole body. So desperate was he for help that he was even considering asking the jurors to save him.



"I thought I was the only one," the Chaos Witch proclaimed calmly, raising her arms to the ceiling of the cave.

"The only one what?" Orphen asked her. He watched her from a slight distance away.

She moved only her eyes his way and lowered her eyelids, making an expression almost like a smile. "The only one unfit to be the Razor-Sharp Successor. The only one unfit to succeed Childman Powderfield."

"What are you talking about?" Orphen grumbled.

She went on, almost monologuing, "Forte's fighting to make it to where he was. He'll inherit Master's position. Colgon... I couldn't find him, but I'm sure he inherited Master's strength. He'd perfected it even five years ago. You? You inherited Master's skills. I wanted to test you. So I made a 'Krylancelo' doll and provoked you. Though that wasn't my only goal, of course. Your power surpassed it, so you won."

"That was just dumb luck—" He tried to protest, but Azalie shut him up with her eyes and continued.

"I don't know about Tish and Heartia and Comicron, but I was jealous of them. They might have... embodied wishes of Master's."

"Wishes?"

"The wish to love someone... The wish to stay out of the limelight... and... the

wish to end his life...”

“Azalie...?” A halfhearted response came from his throat and Orphen put a hand to his chest, deciding not to speak anymore. He should just let her say what she wanted to say. Someone was telling him that. Maybe it was her. Maybe it was him. Maybe it was someone else.

Azalie wasn’t looking at him anymore. She was looking up at the ceiling. And from the spot where she was looking... something sharp slid out of the stone.

She continued. “But what about me? I was supposed to inherit Master’s knowledge... That was the legacy he was trying to leave me with. His knowledge.”

The tip of a blade had appeared in the ceiling. As Orphen watched, it slid through the stone and revealed itself—a large sword, with sorcerous glyphs on its blade.

“But before I could inherit everything from him, I killed him...”

The sword emerged completely from the ceiling and fell, clattering to the floor.

“For me to call myself his successor, I have to know everything there is to know about him. Don’t you think? That’s why I came here. I thought I would start here, where Stabber Childman first left his mark on history.”

Azalie picked up the sword at her feet, speaking with resolve. The Sword of Baldanders. And she turned to Orphen.

Her eyes seemed clouded. With tears.

“I can atone for erasing him from this world. I know I can. At the very least, I want to make sure his life wasn’t wasted. I have to make sure everything there is to him is passed down. That’s... my atonement.”

The tears disappeared. She didn’t even have to blink them away.

Orphen couldn’t say anything in response. He just slowly nodded.

She nodded back to him. “Let’s go, Krylancelo. We’re not running. We need to find out what he saw here in the Poet’s Chamber.”

“I’m guessing she would know,” he muttered, glancing out at the lake.

Sure enough, the woman hanging up above the water was still staring silently down at them.

Chapter XII: Evil Debt Collector

Light appeared in the darkness, like the world opening up. It was only the light from the surface of the lake reflecting on the sword's blade. It wasn't bright or dazzling. It was only noteworthy in contrast to the darkness they were surrounded by.

A paralyzing cold was still emanating from the lake's surface. As if its water itself was death. As if its surface was a door to the world of the dead.

Orphen watched the surface of the lake from the cave. There was no sound coming from it, only the faint light. He felt Azalie behind him.

"Let's go."

He looked over his shoulder at her. That mischievous glint that used to dwell in her eyes was gone. Her gaze was harsh now—intense, but also lonely.

Orphen nodded at her and leapt from the edge of the cave. Before he hit the water, she thrust her sword down into it.

The blade shone, the light transferring into the water and disappearing.

In an instant, the water was transformed to thick ice. It didn't cover the entire lake, but the ice spread out a decent distance around them. Orphen's boots hit the ice and the frozen lake easily supported his body weight.

Plip... Orphen felt a chill on his neck and shuddered. He put a hand to his neck and felt water. It had dripped from the ceiling far up above them.

It was probably still raining outside, and almost all of that rain seemed to collect here, underground. Orphen shook his hand to remove the water clinging to his fingers. The drops struck the ice and scattered.

The dark surface of the lake was like an eye. One that didn't blink and reflected nothing, merely staring up at the woman suspended above it.

The woman... was still staring down at them. As she had been the whole time, without moving a single finger.

“That’s no goddess,” Azalie muttered, stepping up next to him. Her voice seemed to fade like wind blowing over the frozen lake. “After seeing Celestial ruins and reading the World Book, I can make a guess. That’s not a goddess...”

“Correct.” The voice came from far above, where the light from the cathedral shone down on the lake. It went on, “That is Aureole, the founder of Celestial sorcery.”

Orphen exchanged a cautious glance with Azalie. She nodded, understanding him perfectly.

The voice went on. “Before the dawn of Kiesalhiman history, over 1,000 years ago... the rulers of the dragons, the Aymankar, stole the secrets of magic from the gods and created sorcery.”

As he listened to the voice, Orphen wiped his forehead—his bandana-less forehead—with the back of his hand.

Azalie chanted, voice low, “Float...”

Orphen floated up slowly, weightless. Azalie was rising beside him. Freed from gravity, they made their way upward, unrestrained. Straight up, without having to climb the sheer rock wall in front of them.

The voice continued. “The Aymankar understand sorcery more deeply and utilize its power better than anyone else.”

Orphen couldn’t say anything in response. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what to say. It was more that he knew that he was not the one who should be saying it. Azalie knew who should be arguing with that voice as well.

She answered clearly before they could even see the speaker’s face. “That can’t be what you worship.” The Kimluck Church’s doctrines were heavily veiled in secrecy, but there was one aspect of their beliefs that was abundantly clear. Just one. “Death to all sorcery—that’s what you guys are all about, isn’t it?”

However... the voice continued. “I wouldn’t want you to misunderstand. The barrier that we must overcome is you... and only you. Only the human sorcerers who appeared after past mistakes.”

Orphen suddenly laid eyes on the speaker. They’d risen high enough to see

into the hall leading to the Poet's Chamber. As they floated upwards, he was just looking forward until the hall that Azalie had destroyed came into view...

On the edge of his vision, he could see Quo in his red armor. The man leaned against the wall, looking out at them with his arms crossed. The way his lips were pressed together suggested to Orphen that he was in some sort of pain and not just wearing his usual stern look. There were no other people nearby—no *people*, but...

Orphen frowned in confusion. There was something very familiar to him at this point standing slightly apart from Quo. "A doll...?" The words rose to his lips without him even thinking about it.

It was a killing doll, a murderous golem created by the Celestials, just like the ones he'd seen many times in the past. That same familiar, warped form. The shiny skin that made it easy to tell how unyielding its body was. The mouth, like a slit carved into a ham with a blade. The glassy eyes.

Eyes? He was confused again. The doll had very conspicuous eyes. They were a vibrant green. A pure green that was impossible for human eyes. They shone, either from their natural luster or from something deeper inside...

The doll's hideous, triangular face... there was something off about it. Orphen felt that instinctively, though he couldn't explain why. He reflexively tensed, then realized that there was no ground underneath him to brace himself upon.



“A ‘doll,’ eh?” The doll smirked. “Could a doll do this?” Its figure suddenly vanished.

Orphen spun around, some sort of absurd intuition guiding him. Maybe it was just coincidence, but the doll was there, right where he’d turned.

“Teleportation?!” he exclaimed.

“And he’s not just faking it—it’s the real deal!” Azalie shouted beside him.

The doll said nothing in response, merely raising his slender arms as he also floated in the air. He opened his hands, spreading his oddly shaped fingers with their twisted joints.

That was all.

“Agh!” The impact blew the two of them backward into the hall. They tumbled through the air and landed on the floor of the hall. Orphen yelled as he smacked against it, having no way to break his fall. They rolled across the ragged remnants of the floor.

Orphen rose shakily, his sense of balance all out of whack. He held his aching back and looked around for Azalie, but the first person he laid eyes on was Quo.

The large man was walking soundlessly toward him, and Orphen could clearly see the hilt of the Sword of Moord Aur in his hand. He swung the hilt and the fragments of blade rained down like meteors. And they were headed for...

“Azalie!” Orphen shouted, but he was too late.

An instant later, Quo’s sword cut into Azalie’s torso where she lay on the floor.

Her body spasmed, then went still. Orphen didn’t know how deep her wound was, but the blade had clearly hit her.

Orphen wanted to run to her, but before he could, Quo stood between them, pointing his separated blades at Orphen. On several of the small blades, there were stains of blood and pieces of black cloth from Azalie’s clothing.

“Get out of my way...” Orphen grunted, glaring fiercely at him.

But Quo didn’t budge. “Stand down.” His lips curled into a bitter smile. “You

are in the presence of the savior, His Holiness Pope Ramonirok...”

“What...?”

It was the doll’s voice who answered him. “That’s not all.” He floated in the air. The doll. The pope of the Kimluck Church, Ramonirok. “You disgrace our goddess of fate with the sight of your filthy blood.”

Whose fault is that? Orphen grumbled internally. Beyond the blade Quo had pointed at him, Azalie lay on the floor, face down, arms around the Sword of Baldanders. Staring at the back of her head as she lay there unmoving, Orphen said, “I told you to move.”

Out of habit, he began to form a composition in his mind, but it dispersed meaninglessly, leaving him with only that same headache.

Dammit... He was panicking, but there was nothing he could do. The giant in crimson armor, Quo Vadis Pater, stood before him, and Orphen dropped into a combat stance. *There’s nothing else I can do...* His armor and sword had been handed down to humans by the Celestials to be wielded against human sorcerers.

Even if I could use sorcery, it wouldn’t do anything against him anyway. So it doesn’t matter... he told himself, spurring himself on. His pulse stayed the same, but his body temperature was rising. He clenched his fists and burst forward, but... his body suddenly froze.

“...Surely there’s no need to rush to your death.”

His body was like stone, cold and hardened. His body temperature had dropped so suddenly that Orphen felt pain shoot through his chest and he shuddered. He felt his consciousness pulling away. This feeling... He searched around him for a presence. His vision was already starting to go white, but that sharpened his other senses.

Quo was completely motionless. But behind him...

“The pope has something he must ask you.” He moved... and touched Orphen with his fingers.

The pope’s fingers brushed Orphen’s neck. That was all. And yet...

Just the tips of his fingers lifted Orphen's body up and threw him backward. Still paralyzed, Orphen could do nothing to resist. He flew over the pope's head at an incredible speed.

The moment the pope's fingers released him, Orphen was also freed from the paralysis. At the very last moment, he managed to break his fall and raised his head. He'd gone flying five meters. The pope looked back at him, over his shoulder.

Orphen was sure of it then. "White... sorcery...?"

"Correct." The pope nodded with a smile and indicated Azalie. "And not the crude approximation that girl uses. You've never seen *real* white sorcery before, have you? If you had, you'd know why the noble alliance outlawed it. They hold the key to getting off of this continent, after all."

White sorcery... Of course he'd seen it before. Azalie was able to use both black and white sorcery, and never hid her talent for either. But it was true that she'd never been formally trained in it, so it was at a rather novice level... He'd also met white sorcerers who had given up their physical bodies to become spirit beings, but they weren't that impressive either. Orphen had been able to resist their sorcery, since he'd received special training to keep control over his mind.

But he hadn't been able to defend against the pope's sorcery. He couldn't even resist it. And the pope hadn't even used a spell. His power was on par with the silent sorcery of the Celestials...

Orphen suddenly realized. "What's going on?! A doll can use human vocal sorcery...? Celestial dolls should only be able to use Celestial glyphs to cast spells."

"You still labor under a misconception. I am not something created by mere Celestials." The pope turned around fully to face Orphen. "The pope does not bow down to anyone... I have received no orders. I do as I alone wish..."

He's... not a doll... Orphen realized with a chill.

This was the source of the odd feeling he'd had the first time he saw the pope. That there was something different about him compared to other dolls.

He wasn't moving according to instructions. The pope moved under his own will.

The pope slowly waved his arm. "I have something to ask you... I could just search your memories, but many break as soon as I lay a hand on them, so speak your answer to me." He brought his arm back again. "The man that you call Childman Powderfield... Where is he?"

"Master...?" Orphen asked, groaning and holding his aching side. He wanted to at least get to his knees, but the impact he'd taken when he was thrown was still preventing him from doing so. "Why do you want to know...?"

"...Because he was the only one. The only man capable of opposing me... who held power comparable to my Network..." the pope said, loquacious. Orphen wasn't sure if this was typical for him, but he sensed something powerful driving the words of the doll with his own will.

"Hm," the pope added as if suddenly thinking of it. "I suppose I cannot ask anything of the ignorant. I will share with you some knowledge, then."

"Your Holiness..." Quo's voice came from behind the pope in a warning, but the pope ignored him and continued on.

"What do you suppose makes a god?"

I don't care... Orphen ground his teeth, but in order to recover at all from the damage he'd taken, he needed to buy some time.

He glared up at the pope, still prone on the floor, and answered in almost a whisper, "The Kimluck Church worships the three goddesses of fate, the Weird Sisters... These goddesses weave the fate of all things upon their birth in the old world, on the giant's continent. The dragons stole the secrets of magic from the gods and created sorcery, which they could use..."

"The birth of the world. *That* was the birth of the gods," the pope interjected. Orphen wasn't sure whether he was even listening to what he'd said. He looked up from Orphen and out at the Poet's Chamber. "The gods are eternal. Omnipotent, with no limits. The gods are the world itself. All-knowing and all-powerful. And at the same time... knowing nothing and capable of nothing. The gods do not *need* to know the world. They do not *need* power. Because they are

the world! Does an infant need to know what its hand is made of? Does it need to know of blood and flesh and nerves?”

“You speak as if you’ve seen it yourself.”

“I have,” the pope stated simply. He stroked his face with the palm of his hand, turning only his green eyes toward Orphen. “And... I was stripped of my fate. Sorcerous power. Immortality. The founder of sorcery. That is what I am... the pope. When the Celestials saw me, they gained a hint regarding how to change humans into dolls.”

“You’re joking,” Orphen spat, and managed to pull himself to his feet. His body ached, and his headache was only getting worse. Maybe the pope knew how much pain he was in. Orphen couldn’t help but think that as the doll with a will’s smile only seemed to widen as his pain grew.

The pope spread his arms, spread his fingers, spread his mouth wide and shouted, “Do you think so? It was your master who told me that!”

Orphen jumped to the side, and just as he’d suspected, black shards of blade rained down on the spot where he’d just been.

“Quo!” the pope barked in irritation.

Orphen ran past him, watching Quo Vadis Pater raise the hilt of his sword again behind the doll. Pain pierced through the back of his skull to his forehead, but Orphen had realized... if he could endure the pain, it would make him quicker!

He could tell what Quo would do next. The Sword of Moord Aur rained down, much slower than Orphen anticipated. Orphen leapt again, harder, farther. But not to the side. Forward.

He stopped when he reached his destination, and the swarm of blades plummeted down to bisect him.

But before they hit... they stopped. Centimeters away.

One of the blades rested just above his forehead.

Beyond the swarm, he could see Quo’s shocked face. And the sword piercing the Death Instructor’s thick chest plate from behind.

There wasn't a drop of Quo's blood on the blade of the Sword of Baldanders—just some glyphs giving off a silver light. Azalie was standing, supporting her weight with the sword, black combat uniform sticky with blood. She panted, adjusting her grip on the hilt of the blade.

Still piercing him through with her sword, she spoke. "Drop your sword. You know what the Sword of Baldanders does, don't you? There's not a nick on you right now, but if I let go or pass out... it becomes just a regular blade. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that a single thought from me can turn you into stone or a banana parfait or whatever I want."

Quo wordlessly dropped the hilt in his hand. At the same time, the fragments of blade suspended in the air clattered to the floor with it.

"Azalie..." Orphen sighed in relief.

She gave him a bold wink, but the smile on her face didn't change the fact that she was heavily wounded. Her forehead was slick with sweat.

She took a second to catch her breath and turned to the pope. "Finish what you were saying. What was that about Master?"

"Roughly 200 years ago—"

"I said tell me about Master!"

"I am," Pope Ramonirok said with a wry smile. "I speak of the pope, the Ayrmankar Barrier, dragons, humans, the Celestial founder of sorcery, Aureole, her familiar Isterviva, and... Isterviva's pupil, the boy called Doppel X..."

"Doppel X...?"

"His name was purged from history, left behind as only the symbol of his treachery, XX. The Sorcerers' Alliance could not keep his name in their history, though he was the most powerful black sorcerer ever to be..."

The pope's smile vanished like ripples fading away. "Though you were in the Poet's Chamber, did you not receive a Final Audience? It should have been rather simple for sorcerers like you."

"Final Audience?" Orphen asked. He'd heard the phrase several times now.

The pope gave a little shake of his head. It was a perfectly human gesture, one

that he'd never seen a doll make before.

"A Final Audience... a meeting with the past, with Urd."

"The past..." The woman who had appeared in Orphen's dream, along with Sister Isterviva and Master Childman, came to mind.

"Did you see it?"

See it... Did I? No, the dream ended early... His pulse quickened. It ended early, he was sure of it. Azalie had called his name... He'd woken up... His headache worsened.

No... That woman... she'd been looking at him this whole time. With eyes that were alive, even though she should have been dead. As if she was trying to tell him something...

Orphen looked to the Poet's Chamber with a gasp. The woman was still strung up inside the whirling sand over the underground lake. And she was still looking at him.

Almost feeling like he was being sucked into her gaze, Orphen closed his eyes.



"You have been forced to accompany me for too long. I do feel guilt for this."

He was shocked when she spoke. His body had just moved to produce the words without his input. Something pained entered Childman's expression as he directed his gaze up at the ceiling.

His body seemed to know the woman's name, but Orphen himself also remembered it somewhere in the depths of his mind. She was Sister Isterviva. It was the name the killer doll at Fort Basiltrice had sneered...

This is the end... Orphen quietly surmised.

That feeling like floating in water. The uneasy weightlessness that he'd thought was death... but he couldn't wake up. He had to see it through to the end. He was sure of that.

These are Isterviva's memories...

The sorcery took form, drawing endlessly on her life force, but she never stopped her fingers from drawing the glyphs.

That's right. She hadn't stopped. Even though she knew it would bring her life to an end. This sorcery was probably the only thing that *could* end her life...

As she drew more and more glyphs in the air, the man's expression changed from shock to despair.

"Stop, please!" he shouted, and put his dagger down. "You can't have the energy to cast such a huge spell—"

The Celestial race was in decline. The whole species was about to meet its end. And she knew the reason for their fall. It had been their fate since long ago... the curse.

All he could do was tremble. She watched him, smiling a wry smile on the inside. His race was still weak. Humans. Would they be able to survive without her kind's support? *They can, I'm sure...* she thought, almost as if to comfort herself.

They can. She had to believe. Because they were her children.

He was just staring powerlessly at her. How did he view her death? She wanted to smile at him, but she didn't. Her kindness would surely sadden him...

Instead, she stated matter-of-factly, "This glyph will kill you. It will disassemble you into your smallest component pieces, and then reconstruct you several hundred years in the future." The light glyphs were growing larger by the second. Larger and brighter.

When the light finally filled the room, he screamed. She couldn't hear what he screamed, though she wanted to. If she did, she'd probably cry. She was sure of it. But she wanted to hear it...

By the time his scream had faded, the light, too, was gone.

She was prone. She managed to lift her head, the action feeling much more difficult than sorcery to her. Behind her was the beautiful portrait that no longer resembled her in the slightest.

I see. She smiled wryly again. The painting did have meaning.

In between him and her, a lone glyph floated in the air. The glyph was floating slowly and soundlessly toward him.

Horribly slowly. It would probably take minutes to reach him.

Istersiva's voice, a barely audible groan, spilled into the space. "This glyph is... my... my final spell."

He said nothing in response. He merely stared at the glyph.

"If you touch the glyph... your body will be destroyed, and recreated several hundred years later, somewhere on this continent. However..." Self-deprecation entered her voice. "However, you could also easily avoid the glyph... You could walk right past it and finish me off. My child. You are capable of making this decision. So I leave it to you. Whatever your decision, it is not important to me. My death cannot be avoided at this point. This fortress is as fine a place as any for the grave of my kind. I will not be so boorish as to resist death at the foot of my own grave."

He seemed to be trying to scream out once more, but his voice wouldn't come.

He shook his head, then stood unmoving, staring at the glyph.

She went on by herself. "Whatever decision you make, this will take some time. For I must tell you a very long story..."

That story... to him, it was nothing but a myth. But it wasn't to her. And from the myth, he learned the truth...

She could feel her consciousness fading. She could tell he was feeling the same thing, and the shared experience brought her happiness. Likely her final happiness.

Snap—

There was a crisp sound somewhere deep inside his ears. He blinked reflexively and everything around him changed.

He was in a vast sky. Winds whirled about him, but didn't touch his body. He was floating in the air, a disembodied existence.

A vast ocean was beneath him, and countless continents. *Countless...*

Countless continents! Not Kiesalhima... many other continents.

She spoke. "I will use the time I have until death to tell you this story."

Snap—

Another sound in his ear. He blinked again and what he saw changed. The same thing repeated again and again as the story went on.

"It begins in ancient times... Over 800 years ago, according to the memories of my master, the first sorcerer of our kind, Aureole... Before we even existed on Kiesalhima..."

He was standing on the ground somewhere. On a small hill, a verdant forest far in the distance. The light of the sun shone down without restraint, and a gentle breeze blew around him. But it wasn't only nature that was abundant.

The largest thing in his field of view was a thriving metropolis. Spiraling stone footpaths. Tall steeples. It was so vast, he couldn't find the center of it.

It was a beautiful city. And the people who strolled through it... looked human. No, they couldn't have been...

Black hair... They almost all had black hair, but something about them seemed different from humans. They looked more like Celestials.

“The world was gently prospering. Nothing occurring other than six races all creating their own culture... occasionally mingling, occasionally clashing.”

There seemed to be more women on the streets, but there were men, too. They spoke to each other as they walked, laughed, and joked casually. Just like humans...

“Dragons. That is what those races were all called. The steel steeds that amassed overwhelming military might, the War Dragons, Sleipnir. The wanderers of the forest, the Red Dragons, Berserkers. Those who breathe in shadow, the Deep Dragons, Fenrir. Builders of a city of art, the Fairy Dragons, Valkyrie. Those who held everything in their hands, the Mist Dragons, Trolls. And us... Celestial beings, the Weird Dragons, Nornir...”

“There was a time when all six lived in harmony, a truly great age. At the same time, it was the beginning of the end...”

“In order to elevate our culture to new heights, we selected one wise individual from each race. The six Wise Dragons. Marshmuffler. Galiani. Lenhasneen. Priscilla. Puff. And... Aureole. They were called the Wise Council, and were the pride of all our races. And they had a plan that would not shame our pride.”

“Their plan... was a method with which to control the world...”



“What they discovered was... the rules that make up the world... no, the principles of it, perhaps.”

In between dreams and reality, Orphen was hearing two different voices. He opened his eyes again. It probably hadn't even been seconds. But he remembered everything now. Everything he'd seen in his dream.

The pope languidly looked at him, at Azalie, and... at Quo, who was still run

through with Azalie's sword and unable to move. He nodded. Orphen didn't know what meaning the gesture had, but the pope soon turned his eyes out toward the Poet's Chamber.

"The Yggdrasil System—that is what they called those laws. The system that controlled the world. Not physical laws, but a physical system... Yggdrasil. It was the ideal of the gods, and the system was absolute. But it was not immutable..."

Orphen looked out at the Poet's Chamber just as the pope had, and sighed. The woman—Aureole—was no longer watching him. Her eyes were closed.

I see... He nodded, letting his shoulders relax. He didn't need to maintain his stance anymore.

"They discovered those principles... and the means to manipulate them." He unclenched his fists and trained his eye on the pope, speaking louder now. "Sorcery."

Those green eyes stared back at him. "...So you were the successor."

Orphen was silent.

"Krylancelo?" Azalie called out to him.

Instead of answering, Orphen spoke. The words welled up in him like they were coming from someone else. "But something happened. The sorcery that manipulated these principles created a contradiction against the principles themselves... magic. Just like me, right now. You can't go beyond the laws to control them by using the laws themselves."

"The power the heads of the dragon races—the Wise Council—obtained was particularly vast. Power on a completely different scale than the sorcery of each individual race... and immortality. They made direct contact with the gods and were branded and stripped of their fate for it—no longer able to die. I don't know if they rejoiced at this. And I don't want to. What's important is the price they paid for this power... the effect this had on the world!" The pope's shout resounded through the vast Poet's Chamber. "The world went wrong then."

The pope threw out his chest and waved his arms theatrically. Tilting his head, he continued, "The laws of the world, the gods, were all-powerful and all-knowing while at the same time capable of nothing and knowing nothing. As I

already told you, that is what infinite power means. But sorcery destroyed that balance. The gods became slightly less than all-knowing and all-powerful, and slightly more than capable of nothing and knowing nothing. Do you know what that caused?" he asked Orphen.

"Emergence," Orphen answered instantly.

"The emergence of the gods. In other words, what previously had only existed as the principles governing this world manifested as living beings."

"The gods had power that wasn't infinite but that was close to it, but they manifested as simple living beings. And by becoming beings made of flesh, they also obtained their own will. They were driven mad with anger. They laughed themselves silly. Wailed in sadness. And... the old world was destroyed by their power."

Orphen spoke quickly, grimacing from his worsening headache. Ignoring the pain, he went on, "With their newly obtained brains, they thought, and came to one conclusion. They would return themselves, the world, to how it had been. They judged the best way to do that would be to wipe out the dragons. If sorcery were no longer used, there would be no more contradictions with the principles..."

"Wipe out... sorcery. The will of... the gods. Is that... what your doctrines are really about?" Azalie groaned, panting hard. She was probably at the limit of her stamina. Her hands, gripping the sword, were trembling, and her face was pale, though her anger was plain on it.

But on the receiving end of that anger, the pope merely shrugged his shoulders blithely.

"Our doctrines are a bit more... contemporary. If the gods want the dragons gone, we could care less. That's not our concern. Our only concern is with humanity."

"Humanity... human... sorcerers. You don't mean... the gods will destroy human sorcerers, too?!" Azalie shouted.

"I do." The pope's egg-shaped head nodded just like that. "As yet, the gods cannot enter this continent. But one day, they will. And if they learn of human

sorcerers, they will wipe out all of humanity as well! So, before the gods arrive in this continent... we must eradicate the filthy blood of all apostate sorcerers from humanity!"

Plip... Another drop of water landed on Orphen's neck. He'd been holding his breath to scream—to scream *what*, he wasn't sure yet—but with a shudder, he suddenly released it. Looking up curiously, he found a large water stain right where he thought he would, where Azalie's sorcery had destroyed the cathedral's ceiling six hours earlier. The ceiling would still be underground, so maybe underground water was leaking through it as well. An underground water leak.

He didn't care about that, though. Looking back down, he found Azalie still shouting at the pope.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Her face was still pale, but her wrathful eyes contained more than enough vitality. "That's fairy tale nonsense—manifested gods?! When the hell are they supposed to show up, huh?!"

"There's one there." The pope indicated the Poet's Chamber, moving his twisted arm in an elegant gesture.

The woman still hung there.

Azalie raised her voice even more. There was blood on her lips now. Either her throat had torn, or the blood had come from somewhere deeper... "That's not a goddess! Isn't that obvious?! She's a green-eyed Celestial! Though I don't know if she's actually the founder of sorcery as you claim or not!"

"Then who is it who is grasping her neck?" the pope asked quietly, arm still extended.

Azalie went quiet at that. It wasn't because she'd run out of strength. There was shock plain to see in her eyes. One of her hands slipped off of the sword.

She'd realized.

In the sudden silence, the pope moved to point at his own eyes. "Let me tell you about these green eyes. These are my brand. The sign that I've seen the gods."

Those green eyes shone...

“I saw the gods. And the gods saw me. That is why I am pope. I had my fate stripped from me by the goddesses and had to become the first sorcerer of humanity.”

“You bastard...” Orphen groaned. “If the gods saw you and branded you, then doesn’t that mean humanity is doomed either way...?”

“No. The human race as a whole has not yet been marked. But if sorcerer blood continues to spread, the brand—the green eyes of dragons—will eventually appear. There is still time before it makes its way to all of humanity.”

“N... No...” Azalie’s voice trembled. She was about to fall to the floor.

Orphen cursed. She wasn’t just exhausted. *Mental domination!*

He took off running, but he was too late. The wings were already unfurling from Quo’s armor.

Before she could fall to the ground, the wings shoved her and the sword in her hand away. Azalie went rolling along the floor, and the Sword of Baldanders flew through the air in an arc.

Quo roared, expelling the breath he’d been holding in his chest. The wings spread out around him wider than they ever had before, looking almost like flower petals.

Orphen ran as fast as he could. When he passed by the pope, he saw the uninterested look on the doll’s face.

Quo turned his gaze on Orphen and Orphen blacked out for a second. Quo folded his arms blindingly fast and flapped his wings. The wings struck the floor and the Sword of Moord Aur leapt up with the recoil. The Death Instructor grasped the sword’s handle.

Orphen didn’t stop. He closed the distance between them. The moment Quo grasped the sword, the shards of blade on the floor leapt up into the air as well.

One more step! Orphen was close enough to see the wrinkles on Quo’s face now, but he only increased his speed.

Suddenly, the wings appeared before his eyes, in between the two of them.

Orphen was shoved back. He didn't even know what direction he was flying in. He just felt weightlessness, then an impact as he hit the floor.

He'd been sent straight backward. He was lying now where he'd been standing a moment ago. But he didn't feel badly hurt. He stood up quickly.

He'll counterattack soon! Orphen readied himself, but... Quo just sneered at him and turned his back to Orphen.

He was pointing his blade at Azalie. He brought the sword up...

"Stop!" Orphen screamed like he was using sorcery. But a scream alone couldn't even make his enemy turn toward him.

The countless blades of the Sword of Moord Aur rained down on Azalie again as she struggled to rise from the floor. This time, there was a clear spray of blood through the sandy air.

"Bast—" Orphen cursed and tried to take off running again, but his body froze in place. He moved his eyes alone and saw the pope's spindly fingers pointing his way.

"That damn Quo... He's a fool, but he's not the worst at making snap decisions."

Orphen tried to get control of his body back, but he couldn't move a finger no matter how much he struggled. The only thing he could do was glare back at the fingers and green eyes pointed his way.

"Why—Azalie?!" Orphen screamed, spittle flying from his mouth.

She hadn't even been able to move... and now Quo's blade was cutting into her again, like he was toying with her.

It was the pope who answered him. "Because I have something I must ask you... If he had tried to kill *you*, I would have interfered."

"Then—listen up! I've got somewhere I've gotta be!"

"Hmm...?" The pope took a breath as if to give Orphen hope.

Orphen waited for his words, grinding his teeth almost like he believed if his opponent were in his mouth he could chew them to bits. He was still frozen. He

had to break the pope's white sorcery somehow, but... *I'm not close enough to reach...* And even if he could reach, he still couldn't move.

"The man who came from the past, just like me, Doppel X..." the pope said coolly, as if reminiscing. "No, the man you call Childman. Where is he?"

"Who came... from the past..." Orphen repeated as if seeking confirmation. The memories from his dream resurfaced in his mind.

While all this was happening, Quo's sword leapt, Azalie's body jumped, and blood whirled through the air...

At her scream, the pope glanced over as if annoyed, but he returned his gaze to Orphen immediately. "I have been here for over 200 years... For the sake of our doctrines... for the good of the human race."

"Shut up!"

"If your existence incurs the wrath of the gods, your entire race could be wiped out! What meaning do your words and your lives have?! All the pope desires to know is of that man!"

"That... man..."

"That man alone holds the power to kill me. As the first sorcerer of the human race, I am immortal and cannot die. After all, I made contact with the gods and was incorporated into the system! The founders of sorcery are keys! They are linchpins of the system! You all use sorcery through me—it is my existence that allows humans to interfere with the system! However... if I die, humans will lose the power of sorcery."

"Humans gained sorcery... from mixing their blood with Celestials... It has nothing to do with you..."

"All the Celestials gave you was the power to control it. The sense to perceive magic power. Without either of these, sorcery would not exist. You know this. This was something naturally present in the dragons, with their bountiful vitality, but it was not present in humans. They gained this trait through mixing with the Celestials."

The pope stopped there for a moment, then raised his voice. "That man..."

Istersiva entrusted him with some method to kill me. I know it. That is why she trained him to be an assassin! Now, where is he?! Why did he disappear from my Network—”

“Because he died.”

With that short phrase, all the emotion vanished from the pope’s face. He merely stared at Orphen in astonishment. Orphen took a dark pleasure in the vacant look on his face.

“He died. Childman. That’s why the dolls in Alenhatam activated. That dream—I dunno if it’s the Final Audience or what, but it’s basically that Aureole woman’s psychic waves, right? Whatever you want to call it, you saw it too, yeah? You’d probably be sensitive to it if you’re good at controlling people. It’s easy enough for a sorcerer, but those who aren’t sorcerers might pick up on it through coincidence, too. A vision that powerful. Istersiva, huh? She’s Aureole’s familiar... a priestess, right? That’s why she shares her memories. Come to think of it, Istersiva’s portrait went up in flames. I was the one who destroyed all those dolls, too...”

He went on, saying whatever he could think of, but there was no reaction from the pope. The doll just stood there in a daze.

Dammit... If you’re not gonna do anything, then drop your mental domination... Orphen still couldn’t move.

Meanwhile, Quo was still slashing at Azalie. His weapon being what it was, he couldn’t deal a fatal blow to her with one attack, but a large enough number of shallow cuts would do the job eventually.

Yet Orphen still couldn’t move... No.

...Sorcery, Orphen realized. Even if he couldn’t move, there was still something he could do.

I can speak. If I can form a composition... I can use sorcery. The thought alone was enough to cause his headache to come roaring back. He grimaced, but he’d made up his mind. *It’s... the only way.*

Orphen looked at Quo’s back. The wings were no longer spread, likely because he no longer had need of them. If he could just use his sorcery, he

should be able to take the Death Instructor out in one blow.

The fragments of blade in the air continued to swarm Azalie's ragged body. She was no longer even screaming, but Orphen didn't know if that was because she was unconscious or because she simply couldn't move. As he looked at her bloody face, Orphen prayed it was the former.

He concentrated, telling himself, *If I can do this... it'll just take one shot. I just need a few seconds...* He'd never wished for sorcery deep in his gut before. It had always just been there for him to wield.

It couldn't be denied. His sorcery was like another self to him. Neither of them were more significant. They were both just him. With only half of him... he'd no longer be able to live.

I need you right now. What is it that I don't have? What is it that I need to use you?

He heard Azalie's words in his head once more. *"Your heart has gone back to how it was when you were Krylancelo... when you were just a boy."*

No... I'm me. Back then, and now. I've always just been me.

"And you'll stay like this unless you can get back the progress you've made since then."

No, that's not true!

He started to scream.

"I—"

The composition was the simplest one, that he was most used to using...

"Release thee—"

But at his most powerful...

"Sword of—"

Something came faster than his words...

"Light!"

There was a flash...

Orphen screamed, light flashing inside his eyelids. Agony tore through him. It wasn't just in his head anymore. It was a searing pain all throughout his body, like all his organs and his skin were being roasted

His sorcery... hadn't activated.

Quo was looking at him. Orphen could see him through the tears welling up in his eyes. He couldn't fall and writhe around on the ground. All he could do was scream.

In the end, he couldn't do anything...

The Death Instructor held his sword in one hand and sneered at the powerless Orphen—the sorcerer who had lost his sorcery. He pointed his blade, no fragment of it without blood on it now, at Orphen. And like he'd done to Azalie, he lifted the grip high.

Orphen cursed at himself meaninglessly, but he was strangely calm on the inside. *So this is how I die... It all ends here...*

You have to resist death. Even his own words sounded hollow to him now.

I can't move. I can't use my sorcery. No one can save me. Not Claiomh, not Majic, not anyone. This is it...

Plip... Another drop of water landed on his neck. And...

CLUNK!

He wasn't sure what to make of the sound, but in the next instant, a flood of water rained down on him, and rubble started falling to the floor nearby.

A huge rumble shook the cathedral, several impacts shaking the floor.

Finally, Orphen felt himself regain control of his body. He hurriedly leapt to the side. Knocked off course by the falling water and rubble, none of the segments of blade had made it over here, so they all missed him.

And while everyone was standing there, unable to comprehend exactly what had happened, the water and rubble finished falling to the floor.

Orphen stared vacantly at the pile of rubble. The ceiling almost exactly where

he'd been standing had fallen completely, and was now piled up on the floor. And it had landed right where the pope was, as if it was aiming for him.

The pope had disappeared underneath the rubble. And on top of it...

"Ungh..." Volkan and Dortin lay there, eyes spinning.

"....."

Silence.

"....."

A deep, profound silence.

"...Ah..."

Orphen made a sound, somehow calming his trembling lungs.

"...Ah?"

Someone said in response. Orphen wasn't even sure who. Quo, probably. There was probably no one else who could speak.

"Ah..."

Orphen repeated the vowel sound, feeling his organs all pull tight in something like a hiccup. He felt like he could see something before him.

"Ah..."

Something torn apart, joining back together.

"Are you kidding meeeeeee?!" Orphen screamed and raised his right hand.

All the power in the world—it was no exaggeration, it really felt that way—began to concentrate at the point he desired. In an instant, a sphere of pure white light formed. There was a loud crackling sound, like it was taking in the atmosphere around it. And though he was in the midst of its current, he released the power anyway.

The band of light extended. The whirl of light, heat, and force curved out and arrived at the pair of dwarves. There was an ear-splitting roar, and the light and heat that exploded into them seared the entire area around them white—

"Gyaaaaaaaaa?!"

He felt like he could hear a scream as the explosion blew away the rubble and the dwarves with it. It had burst right between the two brothers, sending them flying in different directions, but the rubble flew straight back—that is, straight down into the underground lake of the Poet's Chamber.

And as the mass of rubble fell into the lake, he could see the pope inside it as well...

"...Huh?" he muttered mindlessly.

The pope sank down into the water with the rubble, looking quite literally like a broken doll.



Orphen stood, dazed, and the silence returned.

He glanced between the two charred dwarves lying on the floor. They were both roasted a perfectly equal amount, neither one more burned than the other.

In any case... his headache was gone. It had completely disappeared.

Everything had gone quiet. He couldn't hear the gusting wind that had been blowing deep inside his ears anymore either.

His organs didn't feel like they were churning. His limbs were freely movable. He wasn't in any pain at all anymore.

He wanted to open his eyes wide like he'd been doused in cold water, but he stopped just before doing so and smirked instead.

He raised his head. Quo was just before him. The Death Instructor with the magic sword and armor.

When he thought about it calmly, he comprehended the situation quickly. The underground tunnels. What Salua had told him. The city was built on top of a Celestial fortress built long ago. They'd just happened to pass nearby the underground portion of the cathedral. Orphen was well aware that the tunnels filled with water when the town had one of its long rainfalls. The tunnels filled, and through all the various cracks and fissures under the town, the water collected above the ceiling here. Azalie's sorcery had destroyed enough of the ceiling that the slightest impact was enough to collapse it completely. Unable to bear the weight of the water, it fell in... He didn't know why the dwarves had fallen with it, but he also didn't care.

He almost wanted to laugh. If Azalie had sat up and started laughing, he probably would have, too.

Instead, he glared at Quo. Behind the Death Instructor's large frame, Azalie lay on the floor, blood scattered all around her.

"Right... That's right. I'd completely forgotten it myself, but it looks like I'll finally be able to show you."

With a fearless smile on his face, Orphen said to the man, "This is who I am."

Chapter XIII: Who I Am

“What, desperate?”

“Yeah, keep talkin’.” Orphen walked to the side, keeping his body facing his opponent. He spat at the floor, wiping the remaining fluid from his lips with his fingers. “What’s the point of that huge body you’ve got anyway? At least make your eyes big enough to match it.”

Quo just gave him a puzzled look, clearly not anticipating that response. He didn’t seem perturbed at all, but spread his wings wide all the same. The wings of light extended from his crimson armor.

Eyeing the black hilt in the Death Instructor’s hand, Orphen kept talking. “I dunno what Death Instructors do all day, but you should mix it up, you know? Read some poems by a window sill every once in a while. All the birds’ll fall out of the sky. You’ll be real popular with hunters.”

Quo said nothing in response, just keeping his eyes on his opponent.

“You know, there was something I just hated about you as soon as I saw you. Your build, how you talk, it’s exactly like Master. ’Course, with Master, I never wanted to fill his ears with sand and smash him into the ground—”

“Childman... Was that the youth’s name?” Quo carefully enunciated, slowly raising his right hand, which grasped the sword grip. He raised his chin slightly, fixing Orphen with a stare, then brought his hand down.

Orphen leapt back and to the side to avoid the swarm of blades flying toward him. There was no need to try to move forward anymore...

Quo swept his hand up and the blades changed direction. Orphen leapt again to dodge them, and...

“I spin thee—” He formed the composition in a moment, and released it. “—Halo Armor!”

A wall made of chained rings of light blocked the Sword of Moord Aur. The

impact sent some of the fragments of blade flying, and Quo pulled the whole sword back.

Looking completely unaffected by his sword being blocked, Quo muttered, “Ten years ago... Ten years ago, that youth became my goal.”

“I heard you fought him off ten years ago.” Watching his sorcerous barrier dissipate, Orphen groaned.

Swinging his sword up again, Quo said dispassionately, “He didn’t even try to fight me. By the time I found him, he’d already received a Final Audience in the Poet’s Chamber. He saw me... and he sneered.”

His expression remained unchanging, but Quo was clearly gripping his sword harder. “He walked past me and left. I couldn’t do a thing. I was too afraid. And ever since then... I’ve always been afraid!”

“...Awfully talkative today, aren’t you?”

“If I defeat you, I will conquer my fear! Razor-Sharp Successor!” Quo’s shout echoed through the room. The Death Instructor held his magic sword in both hands and raised it high above his head.

“Go ahead and chant a spell! Charge pointlessly forward! I will sweep away the darkness in my memories!” As he screamed, he brought the sword down.

“Not my problem!” Orphen stepped to the side, dodging the blade. Holding the grip in both hands narrowed the course the blade could travel. The fragments hit the stone floor and scattered like a broken toy.

Kicking one of the blades away with his boot, Orphen said, “I’m gonna get you back for what you did to Azalie.”

Quo couldn’t say anything to him anymore.

Orphen moved quickly, shouting as his opponent drew his blade back to him, “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A wave of heat and light bore down on Quo, but Quo repelled it with one of his wings. The aftershock of the explosion flew back past Orphen, but he was already running.

Leaping over rubble still strewn about the floor, he dashed at full speed,

composition already formed. “I destroy thee—” Quo would need to use both wings to block this. He was sure of it. “I destroy thee, Primordial Stillness!”

Space vibrated around where Quo was standing, a rippling explosion emanating out from him. A split second before it hit, Quo’s armor wrapped its wings around him. The light transformed into complex sorcerous glyphs, erasing the composition itself—as a result, the area enveloped by the wings escaped the effects of the spell. There was a thunderous roar, but Quo was completely unharmed in the center of it.

The explosion inside the closed space shot out to each wall equally, and rebounded from each of them equally. The force moved through the air in the room in a complex flow. Running through it all, Orphen naturally already had his next composition formed. *I just need to buy some time...*

“I leap over thee, Towering Spire!” This composition was not offensive. It merely moved his body roughly three meters in an instant, closing the remaining distance between him and his destination. His vision disappeared, then reappeared, like the snap of a camera shutter. He’d made it.

Quo watched him as he picked up the Sword of Baldanders, next to where Azalie lay on the floor. The light of the glyphs was gone from the blade, leaving only the cold letters engraved in the metal of the blade itself. Orphen slid his fingers across those engravings.

“I’m no Azalie, but...” The weight of the huge sword vanished almost completely and the sorcerous glyphs lit up in silver on the blade. “Even I know how to use this sword!”

Quo was five meters away from him. Orphen had a feeling this was the last chance he had.

They both held their trump cards in their hands. There was no reason to make the battle drag on any longer.

The Death Instructor’s wings of light were already spread wide. Quo held his sword out next to his hip, ready to sweep the blade out at Orphen. The pieces of blade of the Sword of Moord Aur all hung in the air as if waiting for their turn to move.

There was distance between them. That gave Quo an overwhelming advantage. Orphen held his sword down and analyzed his chances. He looked down at Azalie.

Quo made his move, but even faster than that—Orphen plunged the sword down into Azalie's back.

Orphen shuddered at the odd sensation. There was no resistance as the blade slid in. The shining glyphs on the blade each moved onto her body. Once they'd all done so, Orphen pulled the blade out of her.

The light glyphs burst and disappeared, and a second later, her body was transformed into a healthy one.

She might have been conscious that whole time, even covered in wounds. She swiftly rolled over like she'd just been waiting for this moment, and thrust her hands out at Quo. "Light!"

Her sorcery shot flames and a thundering roar forward, and a second later, Orphen kicked up a bit of rubble lying at his feet. When it flew up to face level, he slapped it forward with his palm and shouted, "I leap over thee, Towering Spire!"

It was pseudo-teleportation, but what he'd teleported was the rubble—it flew at Quo at almost the speed of light. All it took was an instant for the stone to pass through Quo's body and materialize again on the other side of him.

Sound disappeared around Quo, who was already engulfed in the flames of Azalie's sorcery. The silence almost seemed to suck all the air around it inside it, then the space suddenly burst. The impact created a gust that buffeted Orphen's face.

And when everything was over... Quo was still standing. Completely unhurt.

His wings were still emitting light, not a bit of their energy lost.

Orphen stared at him, without words. He sensed Azalie rising slowly beside him. She held out her hand without saying anything and Orphen handed the Sword of Baldanders over to her.

Quo wasn't moving. He held his sword in his right hand, standing tall with his

wings raised behind him. There was no change to the fierce expression on his face.

“A valiant effort...” was all he said. Just that.

“...Oh, we’ve got more up our sleeves,” Orphen told him, cracking his knuckles. “We got rid of the pope, at least. Now, let’s carry on until we’re out of moves to make, Quo Vadis Pater.”

“Quo Vadis Pater...” Quo repeated the name Orphen had spoken without much thought. “Where is your faith...” His mouth seemed to have broken, warped into the strange smile he’d been wearing hours before. An ill smile, like he was using every muscle in his body to sneer. “The pope... He is nothing but a hypocrite.”

“...A hypocrite?” Orphen asked, not expecting the word.

Quo went on, though Orphen wasn’t sure if the man had heard him or not. “Childman knows a way to kill him? There is no such thing. Even our goddess of fate has been unable to kill the founder of sorcery for 300 years. He knows he cannot die. He is merely searching for a way to. ...As he will continue to do forever. After you and I, and all Death Instructors, all sorcerers, all the rest of humanity have died.” He looked out over the Poet’s Chamber as he spoke.

“After receiving the Final Audience and donning this armor, I became immune to the pope’s mental domination. And Salua, Mädchen, and Carlotta, who have not interacted with him much, have largely escaped his influence...”

“What are you trying to say?” Azalie demanded, holding her sword ready.

Quo raised his sword in the same way and answered quickly, “I heard some footsteps... so I was just buying time.”

“...What?” Orphen had his back to the Poet’s Chamber, facing Quo. And behind Quo was the wide staircase that led to the underground portion of the cathedral. *Footsteps? Buying time...?*

“It’s not complicated.”

Orphen glanced around. Volkan and Dortin were still lying on the floor, burnt black. There was practically no safe spot left in the chamber after the

destruction Azalie had wrought and the aftermath of their continued battle. Fragments of the ceiling were lying on the floor in places. Azalie was holding her sword at the ready beside him.

Eventually... shadows appeared on the stairs behind Quo. Five—no, seven shadows. The first person to show themselves was a woman. A woman of about 30, holding a fan. Orphen barely registered her pale skin and blonde hair before the easygoing but dangerous air to her eyes overruled all other impressions of her.

Four people he knew followed after her. Salua, Mädchen, Claiomh, and Majic. All four followed after the woman, their hands behind their heads. Behind them were two priest soldiers. That was all of them. Hostages...

“Can you still say you have moves to make?” Quo said quietly.

Orphen had nothing to say in response. Azalie was silent too, unmoving.

The group led by the blonde woman got almost to the bottom of the stairs and stopped there.

Without turning around, Quo said, “Good work, Carlotta.”

“...Sure thing, Quo,” the blonde woman—Carlotta, evidently—responded carefreely.

Orphen just stood there, silent.

“I suppose I’ll give my report now, Quo. Head Instructor Lapointe Solude interfered with my interrogation, so I executed him.”

“Hmph. I figured as much.”

“Oh, and there’s one more thing, Quo... I have a question for you.”

“Hm?”

“Who might these people be?” Carlotta pointed her fan at Orphen and Azalie.

Quo responded fluidly, without hesitation. “Intruders. I’m just finishing up with them.”

“...I see,” Carlotta replied with no real emotion.

Orphen hung his head, staring down at his feet and hiding his face behind his

bangs. He was doing everything he could not to show emotion on his face.

“What’s wrong, Razor-Sharp Successor?”

He felt the urge to respond to everything Quo said, but he endured that, too. The only sign of his resistance was the trembling of his shoulders.

He didn’t know what Azalie was doing, but she was just as quiet as him, so he looked over at her. Like him, she also appeared to be enduring something.

A laugh... scornful, derisive laughter began to quietly fill the space.

“Pfft... Heh, hahaha...” It was Quo, of course.

Behind him, a black tail popped out from Claiomh’s blonde hair...

“Heh, hahahahahahaha...” His laughter gradually grew louder.

Listening to it, Orphen felt his shoulders continue to tremble... but that alone seemed an insufficient outlet for his emotions. Soon enough, his throat began to tremble too, his voice escaping unbidden.

“H-Heheheheheh...”

“Hahahahahahahaha!”

His voice was quieter than Quo’s, but Orphen couldn’t contain his laughter. It spasmed out from him like he was having a fit.

Mädchen gave Carlotta’s shoulder a push...

“Heheheheheheheheh...”

“Hahahahahahahaha!”

Carlotta moved to the side, an exasperated look on her face, and let the four behind her move past her...

“Heheheheheheheheheh...”

“Hahahahahahahaha!”

Salua brought his hand out from behind his head, a sword with a blade of glass in his grip...

“Heheheheheheheheheh...”

“Hahahahahahahahaha!”

Orphen and Quo just kept laughing, in sync.

Orphen had raised his head now, making eye contact with Quo as he laughed. He spread his arms, laughing so hard even he thought it was ridiculous.

Even Claiomh had a pretty impressive sword at the ready...

Not to mention Majic. He hadn't drawn it, but he had a shortsword in his hand, a fierce look on his face...

“Heheh! Heheheheheheheh!”

“Ha! Ha! Hahahahahahaha!”

Something exploded behind Quo as he laughed.

It was probably Leki's sorcery. With no warning, white smoke erupted behind him, and Quo sunk to the floor and then bounced like a huge toy.

One of his light wings was torn, threads of light dispersing into the air like ripped silk.

Quo might have tried to turn around. But even if he'd made it in time, all he would have seen was Salua's face, his glass sword raised high above him.

One blow from the transparent blade and the shoulder without the wing, his left, caved in. Since he'd only half-turned, his side was to Orphen, but he kept turning, and the only remaining Death Instructor, in a way, turned his back completely to Orphen.

A blond boy ran past him and shouted, “Master!”

Majic threw the shortsword he was holding to Orphen. “Please use that!”

Orphen caught it with both hands and drew it without even really thinking about it. The brand new black grip fit surprisingly well in his hand. The sheath was made out of steel, just how he liked it. It looked just like the swords issued by the Tower of Fangs. But the blade—the silver, shining blade—looked familiar for another reason.

This is... But before he could come to a clear conclusion, Quo shrieked like the howling of an enraged beast. He looked over and found Claiomh driving her

sword into Quo's left arm. Blood sprayed out from it, and this time, Claiomh was the one screaming.

Salua was flying through the air, batted away by Quo's still-functioning wing—it had probably happened a moment ago. Claiomh was batted away next.

"Youuuuu!" Orphen took off, shortsword in hand.

Quo was watching him over his shoulder. He flapped his one wing and it soundlessly swept out toward him. But Orphen wasn't worried in the slightest.

"I brandish thee—" Even as he chanted the incantation to release his spell, he could feel the person he trusted most at his back, ready to protect him. "—Blade of Demons!"

The weight of a sword settled in his empty left hand. The wing of light was right before his eyes now, but just before it could bat him away, it stopped. Azalie had leapt forward and thrust the Sword of Baldanders into the wing.

She shouted something and the wing disappeared with a loud shredding sound. At the same time, countless pieces of confetti in all colors—gold, silver, white, red—filled Orphen's view. Azalie must have transformed the wing into them.

Charging through the confetti, Orphen roared, thrusting out the "sword" in his left hand. The force field of the sword sucked up the confetti blinding him and destroyed it.

And just like that, the "sword" of sorcery pierced Quo's right shoulder. A hole opened up in his bulging muscle.

Seeing that, Orphen moved the sword in his right hand. Quo's right arm had been sealed. His left should be immobile thanks to Salua severing his collarbone. He couldn't strike back. If he could do something about his legs, he'd be able to completely immobilize the man. But when he thrust out his sword at the man's right thigh, it was repelled by something hard.

"?!" Orphen grunted in surprise. What had blocked his sword was the hilt of the Sword of Moord Aur... held in Quo's right hand...

Is this guy an actual monster or something?!

Quo was exerting tremendous physical strength, with a hole through his right shoulder. He swung the hilt of his magic sword about, striking at everything around him without stopping.



“Waaaaaaah?!” The loudest scream came from Salua. Orphen had dropped down to avoid the flurry of blades, but it hadn’t been so easy for everyone. He saw the two priest soldiers who had been standing still on the stairs collapse, blood spraying out of them. Salua seemed to have taken some shallow hits as well. Claiomh appeared to be unscathed, since she was lying on the floor to begin with. And everyone else was either outside of the range of the attack or had dodged it well enough to be unhurt.

Orphen moved as quickly as he could to counterattack... but Quo was faster. He wasn’t attacking, however. He was using that speed that was completely mismatched to his huge body to retreat to an unoccupied part of the battlefield. He ran from one end of the hall to the other, then turned to face off against all of the people who’d attacked him in the last few seconds.

He was safe for now—well, maybe not, considering the wounds all over his body. The crimson armor from which the wings of light had sprouted was in a sorry state now. That first blow had ripped the left half of it completely off, and the right shoulder had vanished, too. It had probably been turned to confetti by Azalie’s sword.

With the wings gone, the armor suddenly left him very unprotected. Salua had smashed his left collarbone. And even if he hadn’t, he was bleeding badly from his left arm after blocking Claiomh’s sword with it. Orphen had taken out his right shoulder with his sorcery. Each wound he’d taken should have been fatal.

A normal person would have stopped fighting quite a while ago... but Quo was glaring at Carlotta, rage in his eyes.

“What is the meaning of this betrayal?!”

Carlotta’s response was cool. “Oh, just think about it, Quo...” She made a hopeless gesture, fan still in hand. “Sorcerers, a deep dragon. Two talented Death Instructors turned against me... It’s just too much for little old me to handle, wouldn’t you say?”

She glanced over at Mädchen beside her, who was holding a sword to Carlotta’s neck. Actually, the blade looked like it was pushing into her flesh a few millimeters.

Quo clucked his tongue loud enough for Orphen to hear it. “At a time like this...”

“Plus, it was His Holiness’s orders. If I saw an opportunity... well.” Carlotta cocked her head like it was just a whim of hers. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You will betray your faith as well?!” Quo wailed.

He raised his right arm, even with the hole in his shoulder—Orphen could hardly believe it even as he was seeing it—and brought his sword down. The torrent of blades struck down Carlotta and Mädchen both.

“Mädchen?!” Salua exclaimed.

Mädchen raised her head from where she lay, face up, on the floor and yelled, “I’m alright! Handle Quo!”

She wasn’t the only one who was okay. Carlotta leapt up and began to flee up the stairs. Mädchen started to go after her, but Salua stopped her. “Leave her!”

Mädchen stopped, and Carlotta disappeared up the stairs, shockingly quick. Mädchen turned around, biting her lip, but Salua just shook his head.

“She’s not our problem... Not yet, anyway.”

“...Alright,” Mädchen acknowledged, and turned to Quo.

Orphen was watching Quo quietly, shortsword in hand. There was no need for words anymore, but that wasn’t the reason for his calm.

A blonde girl ran to his side, sword flapping about in her hand as she moved. A dragon that resembled a puppy sat on her head, wagging his tail. When Claiomh reached Orphen, she spun around and pointed her blade at Quo.

Majic stood at the ready behind her. He’d likely guessed that would be the safest spot. It was a good judgment, Orphen admitted with a wry smile.

Azalie was still just standing there, sword in hand, and Salua and Mädchen were together at the bottom of the stairs, scowling at their boss.

Quo was facing off against all of this alone...

“Looks like it’s over, big guy,” Salua told him, holding up his glass sword. There was something in his tone that seemed to stagnate the air just under the

ceiling. "You don't mind if we kill you, do you?"

"...Why didn't Carlotta kill you?" Quo Vadis Pater asked, sounding almost unconcerned. Or maybe he was just talking to himself. "You were too much for her? If that were true, then she wouldn't have gone to the trouble of finding you..."

"There's only one way I know of to deal with that woman." Salua smirked. "Make a deal with her. In exchange for bringing us here safely, we'd kill you."

"Heh..." Quo let out something between a laugh and a huff of breath. "So she brought my death. The pope and the Holy City... Maybe my mental domination never did fade..."

Orphen frowned, not understanding.

Quo raised his right arm as if to keep them in check and turned toward the Poet's Chamber.

The dark underground lake was still silent, sand whirling in the air above it. The founder of sorcery, Aureole, was still looking out over the lake, an empty light in her eyes. She had watched this whole battle... or maybe she hadn't watched it at all.

"Several people have had a Final Audience here in the past..." Quo's whole body was stained a different red than his armor, from the blood flowing from his arms and shoulders. "That is the key to the destruction of this continent."

He indicated Aureole, and the arm grasping her by the neck. "I came to understand some things as I deciphered these Celestial relics. This continent is protected by a vast wall, the Ayrmarkar Barrier, which isolates it from the outside world... This sand is dead... Dead sand, that blows in from the outside..."

As Quo's face paled from the loss of blood, his gaze only seemed to grow sharper. Orphen felt his hair standing on end as he gripped his shortsword. Quo... was not going to die yet. The thought terrified him.

Quo slowly continued. "The Barrier prevented even the gods from getting through... Because of this, the dragons were able to hide themselves from the salvation the gods had offered them several times in the past."

“Salvation?” Azalie repeated.

Quo did not look back from the Poet’s Chamber, but he answered her question. “The gods are... merely trying to return this world to how it was. Is that not the only salvation this sealed-off continent has?”

No one answered him.

“In any case, there was a hole in the Barrier, and from that hole descended beasts who are the servants of the gods, though they were all defeated.”

Quo was breathing harder now. He was visibly losing stamina as he went on, but Orphen’s dread was only deepening as the man spoke. He thought the same might be true for everyone else, too. But no one moved.

“The dragons did not know about the hole... until the first beast, the basilitrice, invaded the continent. And when they learned about it, they trembled in fear. Their continent should have been safe. The hypothesis they came up with... was a simple one. Sorcery must have limits, and the combined power of the Ayrmankar was just not enough to cover the entire continent... and, though they knew of the flaw in the Barrier, time passed without them ever finding a solution to it. Then, 300 years ago...”

It almost seemed like his very vitality was leaving him with each word Quo spoke. “300 years ago was the final invasion of the continent... The arrival of the goddess herself...”

There was a strange shifting sound. Orphen realized what it was with a shudder. It was Quo’s feet. He’d never heard the man make a sound when moving them until now.

“The battle at Fort Ragnarok... The founder Aureole forced the goddess back outside of the barrier, sacrificing herself in the process.”

Quo slowly continued turning toward the Poet’s Chamber. Blood dripping from him all the while.

“Aureole used her own body to plug the hole in the Barrier. That might have ultimately defeated the goddess, but the dragons had already taken extensive damage in the battle. Things were particularly dire for the Celestials. They were already unable to leave descendants because of the poison of the basilitrice.”

Orphen listened silently.

“The rest is as you heard in your Final Audience, Krylancelo.”

It was then that Orphen finally realized that Quo’s words were directed at him. And while he was still unable to reply to him, Quo continued.

“The Celestials divided into two factions when they lost Aureole... One supporting Aureole, who wished to seclude themselves inside the sanctuary in Fenrir’s Forest, and one supporting Aureole’s familiar, the lone priestess who worshiped her, Isterviva. Isterviva came up with a plan to leave behind descendants...”

“...Mixing with humans...” Orphen found himself muttering.

Quo nodded. “That’s right. The Celestials incorporated as much of their genetic data as they could when they mixed with this other race, but those who were born from the union... were just human sorcerers. Not Nornir.”

At some point, Quo had moved to the very end of the hall, the edge overlooking the Poet’s Chamber. “Around that time, one foolish man came to this barren battlefield and discovered the leg of a woman sticking out of empty space. The foolish man, knowing nothing, pulled the leg this way, and the goddess gained her chance at victory. This caused Isterviva to panic... The pope became the founder of sorcery, and the children she’d created gained true sorcerous power. Before that, they were only able to see sorcerous compositions at best. What at first were only dangerous because they had the genetic information of dragons inside them became something that would definitively provoke the wrath of the goddess. She was denounced by the sanctuary, and several years later, there was a war between human sorcerers and members of the Dragon Faith, as well as the Celestials themselves... the Sorcerer Hunts. The only memories you can see are from this later time...”

After all this, Quo finally turned to face Orphen. He held his sword up, and exhaled. “...Do you know what it is I am doing...?”

Honestly speaking, he didn’t. He’d been feeling a vague unease this whole time, but that was all he knew.

Quo suddenly turned to face Salua. “...What were you planning to announce

to the whole continent, Salua? Fool.”

“What was that?” Salua asked, but Quo paid him no mind.

“This whole farce? Ridiculous. What is it you think we are capable of? You, a mere puppet with no power to speak of. This pope, this city, these legends... they have all made you puppets. It’s true. And it’s exactly as you think. I am the same. A marionette.”

A red line dripped down from the giant’s mouth as he made his speech. Blood. But his eyes shone so vibrantly that it was hard to imagine it was coming from inside of him.

“Because of the foolish things you’ve done, I’ve had to take action without adequate time to prepare. There are things I have to do, yet I will die here. But the sorcerers’ impure blood, the apostates who accept these impure beings... all these foolish apostates will end... here.”

Quo raised his sword without wiping the blood from his lips. “The world will be returned to its original owners... thus will this imperfect Serpent’s Garden become a true paradise of the gods, Yggdrasil!”

“Shit!” Azalie exclaimed.

That finally made Orphen realize. *That’s right... Of course!*

But Quo acted faster. He spun around... and took his last breath.

“Goddess! Come forth... I welcome you here.”

Quo Vadis Pater thrust the Sword of Moord Aur out into the Poet’s Chamber.

Orphen leapt forward, but he knew he was too late.

He shouted out, in despair. “NO!”

Quo’s sword, the countless fragments of blade, flew straight forward out over the dark lake—

Swsh! There was a quiet sound, and something red fell from Aureole’s pale brow. The black blade pierced her skull, and a red thread and half-transparent spray erupted from the Celestial’s head.

There was a great rumble.

Aureole's shoulders seemed to fall. The impact had caused her mouth to open, and her limbs were convulsing.

The hand that had her neck in its grip... seemed to be slowly moving. But was that because Aureole's body was shaking, or because the arm itself was moving...? Orphen couldn't yet tell.

"Haaahahahahahaha!" Quo bellowed as the cathedral shook around him. He laughed, putting his whole wounded, blood-covered body into the scorn and delight he felt.

He turned toward Orphen again, even as the shaking floor almost made him lose his balance. The rumbling was deep and low, somehow in chorus with his laughter. "The founders of sorcery are immortal... something like this won't kill them. But if her power weakens even a little... the only thing holding the goddess back will go with it!"

Bloodshot eyes peeled wide open, the man at the head of the Death Instructors shouted. "Very well! The whole human race will have to repent! It's the only way to restore the world! Goddess... I am the savior of this world!"

"Like hell you are!" Azalie's voice broke as she screamed. She shot a beam of heat and light that engulfed half of Quo's body.

The large man crumbled with a great *boom*. His right arm and leg fell away from him into the underground lake, while the rest of him collapsed into the hall. The Sword of Moord Aur fell with his right arm into the dark water.

The Death Instructor may have screamed, but Orphen didn't hear it. He just saw the man lying on the floor, a look of absolute scorn on his face.

"Hah... hahaha." He laughed, and the sound was weaker, but hadn't lost any of its bite. "Hah..." There was a hissing sound as the air escaped Quo's lungs.

The Death Instructor went still.

But the rumbling didn't cease.

"Goddess...?" Mädchen muttered, sounding almost feverish. Orphen looked over to see her drop her sword and fall to the floor, knees trembling. She tried

to make the Holy Sign with her one good hand.

“No!” Salua, on the other hand, still had his sword in a firm grip. “If you start worshiping your own death, it’s all over!”

He grabbed Mädchen’s hand with his free hand, squeezing it and trying to pull her back to her feet, but Mädchen wouldn’t move, her shoulders trembling.

“Owawawawah!” There was a sudden incredibly irritating, tiresome voice—Orphen thought so, at least. The shaking of the floor had probably caused him to hit his head enough times to wake up. Volkan suddenly sat up.

“What—What the?! It hurts almost like I got swept up in a bunch of water and fell from a high place and then took a villainous attack from a destitute sorcerer!”

“...Well, our clothes are wet and there’s a hole in the ceiling and rubble on the floor and we’re a little burnt, so I’m guessing that’s just about what happened,” Dortin muttered, analyzing the situation very broadly (but correctly). That one had also woken up at some point and moved to Volkan’s side. Well, none of this really surprised Orphen, even if he’d been conscious the whole time since he’d fallen.

“Which... must... mean...!” Volkan stood and thrust out a finger at Orphen. “It’s you, isn’t it?! You are the final obstacle on the path to glory of the warrior, the Bulldog of Masmaturia, Vulcano Volkan, you evil debt collector!” He drew his sword, full of life, though Orphen had no idea what he found so amusing about the situation.

Meanwhile, Dortin just looked pensive beside him. “...Why is there never a path back from the path to glory, though. It’s such a simple question, but I just don’t know the answer...” He seemed to be in somewhat of a philosophical dead end.

Volkan went on, not even lending an ear to his brother’s words. “In other words, in order to defeat you, I’ll have to use my ultimate special move of lukewarmly killing you in lukewarm water... huh? Wait a second. I don’t think I’m quite—”

Conk! Salua whacked him on the head from behind with his glass sword and

Volkan sank back to the floor. Dortin sighed next to his knocked-out brother.

“And we’re frickin’ busy right now, too...” Salua muttered, turning to Orphen. “What are we gonna do, Krylancelo?”

“How should I know...” Orphen groaned, squeezing the grip of the shortsword in his hand. He looked out at the Poet’s Chamber, which was still rumbling, and then looked to Azalie’s face.

She was just standing there, sword resting on her shoulder, looking up at Aureole and the goddess with a complex expression on her face... Her eyes were sharp but perplexed, and she wasn’t even looking at Quo’s corpse anymore.

Orphen suddenly realized. ...*There’s nothing we can do.* If there were, she would already be doing it. *If even Azalie can’t do anything... then there’s nothing I can do either...* Waves of despair were crashing down on him.

He looked from Azalie to Salua. The Death Instructor was staring back at him, sword in hand. “There’s...” ...*nothing we can do.*

He looked back at the rumbling Poet’s Chamber. The dark surface of the lake was roiling, countless ripples moving across its surface. The largest of them was directly beneath Aureole.

The arm wrapped around the founder of sorcery’s neck was... slowly extending. It wasn’t just an arm now. Orphen could see a shoulder.

“Orphen!” Claiomh ran over with Majic. “What’s going on here?!”

“It’s dangerous! Stay back!” he shouted, pushing her away.

There were sparks flying in the Poet’s Chamber. Flashes of light like cracks appearing in space. Sand... A particularly dense cloud of sand was whirling around Aureole.

Azalie’s voice suddenly cut through the air. “Everyone, get down!”

It probably wasn’t that she knew what was coming—there was no clear indication of danger. She had probably just smelled it in the air. Not that Orphen knew, really. Still, he dropped to the floor, and a moment later...

— —!

The sound was indescribable. The whole area was rocked by an impact like someone had just popped the lid of a giant, well-shaken soda bottle. The room shook with the sound of the explosion. Orphen squeezed his eyes shut, terrified of the numbness his entire body felt.

Eventually... he felt a sensation like his body was being struck by countless tiny weapons. He wrapped his arms around his instantly bloodied body. He couldn't breathe. There was a loud sound. A breeze... He opened his eyes.

He looked up. What was striking his body was rain. Heavy rain. It was pelting down into the hall and the Poet's Chamber. The ceiling was gone.

Needless to say, the cathedral above that ceiling was also gone. About half of it had completely disappeared. He could see a perfect cross-section of the remaining half of the cathedral spire.

The impact had knocked everyone to the floor. The two dwarf brothers were curled up like pillbugs, and Claiomh, Majic, Salua, and Mädchen had all been knocked out. Azalie alone was standing.

"No..." Orphen cursed. Aureole and the goddess's arm were still there under the rain in the Poet's Chamber. The arm hadn't even done anything. Just a slight movement from it had been enough to cause this much destruction...

Several seconds after the disaster, Orphen heard screams. A great commotion. There was a rush of people moving above ground, priests and otherwise, who had probably already been scrambling to identify the sounds of battle coming from below.

Now, the Poet's Chamber, which had been closed off for so long, was fully visible to anyone looking down from the surface. Until the whole continent was destroyed, at least...

"Dragons..." Orphen murmured, desperate. He wiped away the drops of rain clinging to his face. "Dragons should be able to stand up to the goddess..."

"If they still had the power they had 300 years ago, sure..." Azalie responded quietly. She had a cynical smile on her face as she took the sword down from her shoulder.

The ground rumbled. How far could these vibrations be felt, Orphen

wondered. Just in the cathedral? In all of Kimluck? Or throughout the whole continent?

Rain. Sand. Rumbling.

Amid all that, Azalie looked frighteningly small.

She was trembling. Orphen could hardly believe it even as he saw it.

She went on. "...If everything I've heard is to be believed... 300 years ago, all the founders of sorcery were present among the dragons. They built this fortress and met their enemy here. But how much power do the remaining dragons hiding in the sanctuary have...?"

Orphen recalled the words Isterviva had spoken in his vision. *The dragons secluding themselves in the sanctuary have no strength left.*

"I got it. I finally understand..." Azalie faced him. The mischievous light that used to be present in her brown eyes was completely gone. Instead, they burned with determination, terror, and delight. "Master was... trying to find a successor to the fading Dragon races... in accordance with his mother's will..."

"Azalie?"

"I just remembered it now. I saw that same vision in a dream... while I slept."

Crash! A bright flash cut through the space between the raindrops, drowning out the darkness and shadow. Orphen covered his face with his arm at the sound, then peeked out at the place it had burst from.

Lightning had struck the goddess's arm—either it had struck from a rain cloud, or maybe it had discharged from the goddess's arm itself... Either way, Azalie hadn't moved an inch, still standing facing the Poet's Chamber.

The goddess's full arm had clearly invaded the space, all the way up to the shoulder. And each time the slender, graceful arm moved, a huge cloud of sand whirled around in the air.

"I understand. I understand everything. What was written in the World Book wasn't just a meaningless story..." Azalie muttered as if possessed. "If that comes all the way in... the continent will be destroyed. And the dragons can't stop it anymore..."

“Azalie?” Orphen repeated her name. He sheathed his shortsword and made his way over to her.

She turned as if she’d expected him to do so. And she said to him, “There is... a way.”

“Huh?”

“Krylancelo. You know about spirit forms, right?”

“I’ve seen them... but...” As he spoke, he realized her intention. “You can’t!” he shouted, and ran to Azalie. “There’s no way! You can’t—”

Azalie’s waterproof battle clothes gave off a suffocating luster in the rain. She pressed the Sword of Baldanders into Orphen’s hands with a look that brooked no argument. Then she told him, tone matter-of-fact, “White sorcerers are capable of transforming their physical bodies into spirit forms. In spirit form, casters become unstable existences, but they’re freed from all physical limitations. And their power grows to levels rivaling dragons...”

“Like hell!” Orphen threw the sword to the floor and raised his voice. “It’s impossible, Azalie—that kind of huge spell, you’d need time and incredible skills to pull it off!”

“You don’t. You can do it in an instant,” Azalie told him calmly, picking up the sword he’d thrown to the floor. She held it out to him again. “You could use this sword to transform my body into a spirit form...”

Orphen yelled wordlessly, his breath caught in his throat. While he was trying to suck in a breath to say the words properly this time, she spoke up again.

“There’s no other way! I’m the only one who can maintain my existence in spirit form, and you’re the only one other than me who can use this sword!”

“I’m not going to lose my sister again!”

The rain, the rumbling, the thunder all roared around him. Orphen raised his head, struggling against it all.

Azalie clucked her tongue in disappointment. “...Master crossed 200 years in order to protect this continent...”

The rumbling was louder than her voice now. The ground was shaking hard

enough to rattle the pieces of rubble on the floor against each other. Rain water had poured down into the hall, flooding it up to their ankles. The water was gushing down into the underground lake. The surface of the lake was no longer black. In the light, the water was now clear.

Orphen listened to her words amid the noise of the rain. She was standing right in front of him, but her voice sounded like it was coming from far off.

“Sister Istersiva, who lived her life for the founder of sorcery, gave that life to send Master to our time... I think it was all for me.”

“There’s no reason for you to have to sacrifice yourself.”

“There was no reason for Master to leave his own time either... He didn’t need to go along with Istersiva’s spell. And I...”

“Either way... Even if you become a spirit form, it’s not like you can stand up against a goddess.”

“I can,” she declared, and indicated the Poet’s Chamber.

It wasn’t just a shoulder now. Half of the goddess’s chest could be seen, and the nape of her neck, too. It was all over. It had to be. But...

Aureole had reached up and was grabbing the hand around her neck. The wounds on the founder of sorcery were already gone. She was glaring in the direction of the goddess, one finger of her left hand drawing a small glyph in the air. The glyph swayed like a silver flame and burst when it reached the goddess’s neck.

A huge explosion blew away half of the lake. The lake water flooded into the hall in a wave, opposite the torrent of rain water flowing in from the surface. By the time it reached Orphen, it was only at his knees or so, but it still almost knocked him over.

Azalie, being lighter, had fallen to her knees, but she stood up slowly, staring straight at the goddess, and said, “Aureole is getting her strength back. She’s not strong enough to push the goddess back yet, but... if I lend her my strength, maybe...”

“Still... you can’t.” Orphen pushed away the sword she was still holding out to

him. A second later... her fist slammed into his face. The blow had taken him by surprise, his field of view narrowed by the rain in his eyes. He saw sparks behind his eyelids as he fell to the side. He managed to roll when he hit the ground, but he regretted it after it happened. It had put him several meters away from her.

“Fine,” she said to him, and turned her back, slowly walking toward the Poet’s Chamber. She ran her fingers over the sword blade. “I’ll do it myself.”

“You know better than anyone that you can’t transform yourself with that!” Orphen pulled himself to his feet, boots slipping against the wet floor.

One glyph after another lit up on the blade of the Sword of Baldanders.

And in the Poet’s Chamber... the battle between goddess and founder of sorcery continued. The goddess’s arm tried to move, and Aureole struggled to keep her still.

A flash of lightning turned the grey rain pale blue for a moment. Then there was ear-splitting thunder.

He screamed. “I won’t let you! I’m the—”

—the only one who can kill you—

He ran. The weight of the water around him impeded every step, but he ran as fast as he could toward Azalie’s back.

“I’m the only one who can stop you!” As he shouted it, he came to understand.

That’s right. I understand now too, Azalie... Why Master trained me to be able to stand up against you...

Azalie turned to him, but he didn’t see her. He saw Childman Powderfield. Or rather, the man he’d seen in the vision, crying in despair.

Master could have killed you, too... but he wanted me to do something he couldn’t do.

The pope had called him Doppel X, calling it a symbol of his treachery. He was a man who wasn’t able to keep the person he loved most, Isterviva, by his side.

The world’s going to need Azalie... Master would have needed her, too... but

the reason doesn't matter. I'm going to stop you! Like I should have five years ago—

Five years ago.

“Don't look at me...”

He heard the exact same words he'd heard five years ago.

His feet slipped, the flowing water under him snatching them out from under him. Orphen went down, face first. As his view shifted all too quickly downward, he clearly saw the Sword of Baldanders stabbing into her chest.

Don't look at me—

The only difference between now and five years ago was that it wasn't a scream or a plea, but a simple request.

He hit the water and the sound of the splash echoed against his ear drums.

Still, he forced his head upward. All he could see was Azalie's shoes, but the outline of them suddenly vanished, and his heart burst.

In the end, he couldn't move or blink. All he could do was watch it all happen.

Later, when he thought back on it, he would realize that his memories were hazy in places. Maybe part of him had felt he had to obey her command not to look.

Her feet vanished. Where they'd been, the Sword of Baldanders fell and crumbled as if it had used up all its power, melting into the rainwater. The blackened fragments of the weapon sped off in the flow of the water, sweeping out over the Poet's Chamber.

Light burned his eyes. The founder of sorcery must have attacked the goddess with another glyph. It was the same light as moments ago. He almost felt like he could see... a white figure being sucked up into that light.

Another light exploded, then another—each burst came before the previous fully faded. It wasn't just light now. Waves of heat were coming down with each explosion, too. The humidity around them shot up as the heat turned the rainwater to steam.

Suddenly, the light faded... and Orphen saw, for just a moment... the feet of the founder of sorcery, disappearing into empty space—the goddess's arm was gone now, and with Aureole, the white shadow that Azalie had become also disappeared, pulled through the hole in the barrier.

“No...” he said in a powerless whine.

All that remained in the air was a black hole. A spherical shadow opened up in space. The hole in the barrier—and it was getting smaller fast enough that he could see it shrinking.

The hole in the barrier was closing.

“Don't think... this means... it's over.” It was Quo's voice.

Orphen turned with a shudder and found Quo still lying in the same place he was earlier, though he was slowly sliding toward the Poet's Chamber from the wave that had come up from the lake and the flow of the rainwater. Half his body had been blown off, but he was smiling, though Orphen had no idea how he was even still alive.

“There is a limit to... the strength of the loathsome barrier... of the founders of sorcery. The hole closing here... means that another hole has opened... somewhere on the continent. But where? Masmaturia? The capital? Or the center of the continent... the dragons' sanctuary?! It matters not... Our goddess... will win in the end...”

He probably didn't have the strength to laugh loudly anymore. But with a far more powerful smirk on his face... Quo fell into the underground lake.

Orphen just watched silently. It was quiet. Unbelievably so. There was nothing left...

He looked up at the Poet's Chamber. The hole in the barrier was nowhere to be seen.

He felt like there was less sand now, too.

Only the rain continued to pour down on them.

He held his shortsword to his chest and looked around him. Majic was lying on the floor a little ways away from him. Claiomh was right next to him, blonde

hair fanned out around her like flower petals. Leki was on top of her head. Being a deep dragon, he wasn't scared of the water. He was just licking Claiomh's face intently.

Salua and Mädchen were both on the floor, too. Salua was still clutching his sword, while Mädchen's had drifted away. Death Instructors... but the only man who could be called a Death Instructor in the truest sense of the title had died.

Volkan, needless to say, was fine. But he was also, needless to say, still unconscious. The same went for Dortin. Orphen sighed... for all sorts of reasons, but the thing weighing heaviest on his heart was the realization that he owed some thanks to these two...

Orphen stood. He felt heavy. He had to drag himself up with the weight of the water clinging to him and the fatigue and pain weighing him down on the inside.

"Another hole in the barrier will open somewhere..." he told himself.

And he forced himself to smile. This wasn't over yet. There was no need to give up.

Only the rain continued to pour down on them. It would one day end, but for now, it poured down endlessly on the Holy City.

Epilogue

When the sun shone down on Kimluck, the light reflected off of the remaining humidity in the atmosphere to create a gem-like glitter that almost burned the eyes of anyone who saw it. A white town. A Holy City made of stone sat atop wet earth. A beautiful cathedral, surrounded by slums... a half-destroyed cathedral.

The sand that had blown in this land for hundreds of years, dead sand blowing in from an old, destroyed world—those winds of devastation had ceased.

Half of the cathedral had crumbled away, but the pope's holy chambers, in the deepest part of the building, were completely unscathed. *Completely*—not even a candle out of place.

Carlotta kneeled in the room, her face betraying not a hint of the irony in her action. Before her bowed figure was a thin paper screen, the shadow of a saint upon it.

That was one of the things about the Holy City that would never change.

She turned to the side and saw a boy with an iron mask on his head bowed low. His prostrate form was almost like an ornament sitting on the floor. This too was something that would never change. But this was only an imitation of eternity, something that would remain unchanging only if something else refused to change as well.

Carlotta awaited the words of the saint. Waiting was not painful. She'd already been waiting for years anyway.

"Carlotta." Pope Ramonirok's sacred voice emanated into the air of the chapel. "I appoint you head of the Death Instructors. You will bear that charge in this, an unprecedented time of hardship. A highly secret role within the church..."

She bowed her head low.

Things were going to change.

Carlotta thought as much, finding it ironic.

The apostates, Mädchen and Salua, that hateful pair. They had, at the very least, achieved their goal. Change would come to the Holy City eventually. Decisive change.

But some unchanging things would remain.

Change.

Only those who knew what would change and what would stay the same would be able to remain, themselves, unchanging.

She knew that this could be called peace, or harmony.



“...You’re leaving?”

Nashwater was a city of middling size at the foot of the Ledgeborne mountains. Orphen was staying in this town that was just to the south of Gate Lock.

At the outskirts of this town, with no wall or checkpoints, Orphen was seeing Salua and Mädchen off.

“Sure you don’t want to recuperate a bit more? I hear there’s a good hot spring resort a little up the mountain,” Orphen asked, eyeing Mädchen’s arm, which was in a cast slung from her neck. But just as he expected, she shook her head, a blue cloth wrapped around it.

“I’m worried about Oleyl... I want to stop by his house first, then figure out where to go from there. It already took us a while to escape from the Holy City...”

“So she says,” Salua said with a sour look on his face.

Mädchen gave him a particular look and laughed. She wasn’t wearing her armor because of the sling on her arm, so Salua was carrying it, along with the entirety of her other belongings. Well, some things never changed...

“Anyway, here.” Mädchen held out a red bandanna and two pendants—crests

depicting a one-legged dragon wrapped around a sword. One belonging to him, and... one other. “Your clothes and weapons were too bulky for me to smuggle out, but I figured I could at least bring you these.”

Orphen accepted the items with a grateful nod. He tied the bandanna tight around his head. It felt a little strange, since he hadn’t worn it in a while. He hung one of the pendants at his chest as well, feeling the familiar sensation of the thin chain around his neck.

Something occurred to him then and he took the shortsword, the one in the black sheath, out of his pocket. The one he’d received in the cathedral. Showing it to Salua, he asked, “Can I really keep this?”

He remembered the shape of this blade vividly. It was the dagger Childman had been holding in the Final Audience, that vision he’d seen.

“Who’s gonna use it but you?” Salua smiled, adjusting the big bag on his back containing Mädchen’s armor. “That’s the weapon Childman Powderfield used to end Oleyl’s life as a warrior ten years ago. Stabbed all the way into an old dude’s thigh. It’s not a very sexy story, but it works well enough as a history. Thus, another magic blade is born. I’ll let you give it its name.”



“Haaah hah hah! Well, it hurt like I got swept up in a bunch of water and fell from a high place and then took a villainous attack from a destitute sorcerer, but the best quality of a hero is his heroic healing power! I’m already all healed up and ready to go!”

“I feel like you should wait until you’re out of that wheelchair to say that...” Dortin muttered, pushing his brother along.



The region controlled by the Kimluck Church, generally called Gate Lock, lay in the north of the continent.

It was a barren land containing almost nothing save for the Holy City of Kimluck, and just before entering that land, there was a small shack that hardly anyone knew about.

Though it could be called a shack, it did appear that someone lived in it. It was a small house made of wood, surrounded by fields that were no longer tended.

There were curtains drawn at the windows, and the garbage sitting outside didn't look like it had been there very long.

But there was no one inside the shack.

Both the shack and the shed and everything else would just sway in the wind now, waiting to be weathered more and more with age. All they would do was wait in silence to rot...



Rand's wife made a fuss when the rain ended. He didn't know why, since it was obvious that once it started, it would have to end at some point. Once the humidity faded, the dust would whirl through the air again, so it was perfectly clear to him that it had stopped without hearing it from her. He told her not to make a fuss over something so stupid and she didn't make him any breakfast that day. It was unfair treatment, or so he reasoned.

He patted the leg he had an ugly cast around. The only thing he could do was spend some time recovering in bed.

Remembering the face of the kid who'd broken his leg the other day, he felt his mood worsening. His bed was starting to feel awfully hard, too. He told her to air out the mattress sometimes, but the love of his life, Jessie, had yet to do so.

Though, that was just like her, he thought with a fond smile. Clinging to the window sill by his bed, he pulled himself up and opened the curtains.

The rain had stopped, but nothing had changed. Although he did feel like the cathedral that towered in the distance had gotten a little smaller lately.

"Hwaaah..." he yawned, and decided to go out after all. He'd go to the bar. His injury was all Laniote's fault, so it was only logical to get the guy to pay for his treatment. Jessie didn't make that much, after all. It would probably be good to be more thrifty, too. There was no way Laniote wouldn't be at the bar at this time.



“Haaah hah hah! Well, all sorts of things happened, but I’ve recovered perfectly from falling down the stairs along with my wheelchair, too! My vitality is truly to be admired! It’s only to be expected of the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Hero, Vulcano Volkan—wait, if I put ‘the Great’ before ‘Hero,’ then I can’t put a ‘the Great’ before ‘Volkan’... Punch!”

“I don’t understand why you have to tell me these things while punching me, but if you really want to put a ‘the Great’ there, then I think you can just use two of them and there aren’t that many people who would complain about it,” Dortin muttered, pushing along a broken wheelchair.



Three figures walked a path far to the south of Kimluck. One was a lanky man with a huge sword and a large pack on his back. One was a woman with a bandaged arm in a sling and a blue cloth wrapped around her head. The last was an old man of short stature.

“I dunno...” The meaningless complaint came from the man.

“What?” replied the woman.

The old man just walked silently behind them. It wasn’t as if he was slower than them, though. In fact, he was actually matching the pace of the man trudging before him.

With a theatrical sigh, the man said, “We’re all no-strings-attached now, so I dunno what we need a chaperone for.”

“What do you mean, no-strings-attached? We’re fugitives... And what’s wrong with having him along?”

“You know what’s wrong.” The man kicked at some grass on the side of the road, scattering the petals of some unnamed white flower.

Watching him, the woman protested, “Stop that. You’re behaving like some punk.”

“Oh, shut it.”

“I don’t think I will. What’s wrong about it, huh?”

The man hesitated for some time, seemingly missing the opportunity to say what he wanted to say. Finally, he settled on, “I’m just bored again.”

The old man wordlessly followed.



“Haaah hah hah! Well, since the wheels changed shape a bit, my splendid armored tank doesn’t quite go straight, and so, thanks to a careless mistake of my servant driver Dortin, we crashed into a punk who just happened to be walking down the street and got a fight picked with us, but we repelled the villain, so, uhh, well, y’know...”

Dortin didn’t say anything at all as he pulled the now unmoving (since it didn’t have wheels anymore) wheelchair along behind him by a rope.



“...We can’t publish a book like this. The church’ll kill us.”

“You don’t have to publish a ton of ’em...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just print one. Print one, and sell it to a used bookshop or something.”

“...That’s no way to run a business.”

“You can just bill Leticia MacCreedy in Tefurem for your losses. Here, I’ll give you her address.”

“Well, if you’re gonna go that far... Long as I don’t lose anything, I guess I could do it.”

“Good, good. That’s great.”

“...So, what do you want the title to be?”

“It doesn’t need one. No, wait... I know. Just make it the World Book. And make it as flashy as possible. Give it gold embossed borders. And how about making the cover pink with green stripes?”



And...

“Hot spriiings♪”

Pitter patter...

Orphen heard a rather cheerful shout from the room next door, and then footsteps approaching from the hallway outside.

Slam! The door opened without a knock. Gazing sleepily at it, Orphen watched as the blonde girl who’d invited herself in spun around (spinning the black baby dragon on her head as well), her skirt lifting up in the air with the motion. She came to an abrupt stop, like she’d hit a barrier, and clapped her hands together with a big grin on her face.



“Hey hot springs, morning hot springs, were you still hot springs sleeping hot springs, Orphen? If we don’t hot springs get going quick hot springs, then the water’ll cool down and it’ll be hard to heat it back up again hot springs.”

“Uh, I don’t think there’s any need to get so worked up about it... It’s just a recuperative bath...” Orphen told her, eyes narrowed as he sat on his bed.

Claiomh hopped into the room. “Recuperative?” she asked. She really cocks her head all cutely when she’s in a good mood. “Were you injured, Orphen?”

“No, but... things have been kinda crazy lately, so I guess I just wanted to take a break, you know...”

“Then we should hurry up and go! The hot springs are up the mountain, right? It’s half a day to get there by carriage, I think. And we said we were going today, right? Come on, come on. If you don’t get up, then I’ll open a hole in the floor from downstairs and drag you outside myself.”

What’s scary is I can’t say for sure if she’s joking... Orphen thought to himself. “No, I thought maybe we could stay in this town for a little—”

“What are you saying?! A ‘little’? It’s been a month already! Besides, if you do that, you’ll rest *here*! Don’t you think you should save up like three days of tiredness before you get in?”

“What are you, some kid who skips three meals just to afford some real meat when you haven’t had any for a week?”

“You’re the only one who lives such a scary life, Orphen.” She strode forward, grabbed his arm, and started pulling him. “Come on, come on. And come to think of it, where’s Majic?”

“He got up early to go jogging. And we can’t leave until he gets back, right? I haven’t even changed yet. Get out, would you?”

“Waaah! You’re so mean, Orphen!” Claiomh cried as she left the room. Orphen watched her with narrowed eyes.

After she slammed the door shut behind her, he got out of bed with a sigh and started changing sluggishly.

He looked out the window. It was sunny. He’d slept with the window open,

which had left the room a little chilly in the morning. It was probably about time to start closing it at night.

He walked over to the window and put his hand on the sill, leaning out. The cool, high-altitude air of the Ledgeborne mountains felt nice.

Just then—*shwp!*—something flew in from the window, grazing his cheek. It had been fast. Fast enough that it hadn't registered in his vision at all. He turned slowly and found an arrow embedded in the wall behind him.

Orphen walked over to the wall and yanked the arrow out. It was a shoddy piece crafted from a random twig and an arrowhead sharpened with a rock. It was probably a miracle that it had actually traveled so fast. He carried it back to the window.

This time he heard a voice. "Haaah hah hah! See that, Dortin? That debt collector was about to piss his pants! Another villain vanquished by a shell shot out by our super tank! All thanks to the Great Hero of the people the Great Vulcano Volkan's 'Operation There's No Need to Walk Any Farther for That Stupid Man So Let's Use a Long-Distance Attack to Hang Him to Death with a Hanger'! My victory has just been clearly recorded in the annals of histor—"

"Don't put—" Orphen leaned out of the window, holding the arrow up above his shoulder. "—two 'the Greats' on!" He threw the arrow with as much strength as he could muster as he shouted. And it flew down directly beneath the window toward Volkan, who was covered in bandages and, as expected, holding a couple of shoddily made arrows.

The arrow flew true and landed a clean hit on the dwarf's head. It didn't pierce through but just crashed into him, and Volkan sank to the ground... falling off of the beat-up wheelchair Dortin was, for some reason, pulling by a rope.

Looking down at them from his second story window, Orphen nodded to himself. "Good, good. That puts the total score at 248 wins, 0 losses. Just two more for a nice 250."

"You're keeping record...?" Dortin muttered.

"He's just that kind of person," someone said as they passed by. It was Majic.

He was standing behind Dortin, jogging in place with a towel around his neck.

“You say somethin’?” Orphen asked, and Majic averted his eyes.

“Just repeating what he said.”

“Why?!” Dortin cried when Majic foisted the responsibility on to him.

Orphen sighed. Not that he was particularly troubled by any of this.

“...Anyway, you’re late. Claiomh’s all pissed ’cause this means we’ll have to leave later.”

“I took a little detour,” Majic responded, jogging around in circles as if standing in place would actually be more tiring. “I realized recently that your training schedule is actually a little lax, Master. And you skipped that lecture on control yesterday because you were tired, right?”

“Well, guess that’s true,” Orphen admitted vaguely, scratching his cheek.

Majic looked up at him with pursed lips. “Please do it tonight, okay? I have a lot of things I need to learn, right?”

“Well... yeah.” Orphen found himself smirking. If the boy wanted him to be strict, well, there were plenty of things he could do. He was about to say something, but before he could...

“Majic!” Claiomh kicked the door to the inn open and leapt out onto the street. She pointed her finger at Majic, Leki still on her head, of course, and the boy’s face twitched a few times. “You’re late! How long does jogging take, anyway? You should finish it up in two seconds! Do you know what your punishment will be?! I’ve been going easy on you up until now, but in five seconds, I’m gonna get serious!”

“Whyyyyy?!” Majic screamed, and ran off at a pace that could no longer be called jogging.

“Ah! Hey, wait! You’ll only make things worse on yourself by running!” Claiomh took off after him and the two of them disappeared down the other side of the street.

A short time later... there was an explosion a few blocks down. Well, they’d been staying here for a month at this point, so the people of this town were

probably getting used to this kind of thing...

“Umm...” Dortin spoke up nervously. “What should I be doing, exactly?”

“You want my advice? Best thing you could do right now is cut ties with that good-for-nothing.”

“...Yeah, I’ve actually been thinking the same thing for a while now,” Dortin murmured, loading his blood-covered brother into the wheelchair (but could it really be called that if it had no wheels?) and dragging him away.

Orphen smiled. He leaned onto the window sill and enjoyed the breeze.

It’s not ending yet... Well, it is just a wayward journey.

There was another hole in the barrier somewhere else on the continent now. And from there... he’d be able to get outside of the barrier.

Outside of Kiesalhima... That’s where Azalie was.

He looked up at the sky and flinched at the breeze blowing inside.

“It’s almost fall...”

Afterword

“Afterword... Oh! That means it’s all over, right?! Even the proofreading?! Incredible! Viva Afterword! What should I do with this sunny feeling? You there, passing by! I have a present for—wait! Why are you running?! Wait, get back heeere!”

“Stop that (Kick).”

“Agh?! I’m bleeding...”

“No you aren’t.”

“Hrm? Who are you?! What kind of scoundrel would put a damper on my excitement?!”

“You can remember characters that you came up with, can’t you?!”

“Hmm... uhh... right. Sakakibara Ikue... A snack... oh! Carl! Carlotta Mausen!”

“...What sort of route did you take to end up there... Whatever. Anyway, what are you frolicking around for?”

“Mm, well, I just finished my manuscript for volume 10. I figured I’d spread it out about four meters in the middle of my floor and take a little break.”

“Four meters?”

“Precisely. But I’d be in real trouble if I spilled water on it while it was spread out, so what’s really important is an umbrella or something like that. Or maybe the control panel to a broken machine that I nicked from work.”

“...?”

“If I’m that careful, then I’ll probably be safe. That’s a lie, of course.”

“...It’s a lie?”

“Well, it just means the author is relieved enough right now to be spouting off things like that.”

“...Seems less like you’re relieved and more like there’s some fatal flaw in the

defensive system of your personality to me...”

“(Ignoring her) In any case, I was kinda wondering what would happen in the middle there, but seems like we’ve made it to the end. It was way more pages than I was planning, though. Mmm. It took ten books to get this far, though... Really makes you think.”

“Yeah, what a waste of time.”

“(Ignoring her again) Though of course, now that we’re here, I’ll have to think about what happens next. Let’s can the spin-offs, actually (quick decision). After all, I’m planning on the next volume just being some carefree hijinks.”

“Stupid people really seem decisive when they’re just making decisions without thinking about anything, huh?”

“.....”

“...”

“.....Hey...”

“Please, go on.”

“Oh, shut up! Geez!”

“Well, I’m just stating my honest opinions, here.”

“Don’t say that sounding so refreshed.”

“Doesn’t pay to be honest, huh...”

“(Ignoring her) Putting the idiot aside, we’ve finally managed to get to a juncture in this series now. Thank you so much for sticking with me all this time, everyone (bow). Of course, it’s the way of this series that it’s not like this is the last volume or anything. I’m thinking up some new developments for the series from now on... though we’ll probably just be doing the same thing, really (lol).”

“Out of ideas, are you?”

“(Kick) Anyway. As you may have guessed, if the story up to here was the ‘Western Part,’ then the next part will be the ‘Eastern Part.’ This is the part where things that have only been named so far will start playing real roles in the story. I hope I can live up to your expectations... Hm? What’s wrong,

Carlotta?”

“I’ve thought up a haiku.”

“Oh...?”

“Pretend all you like *in front of your dear readers*. I know you’re a hack.”

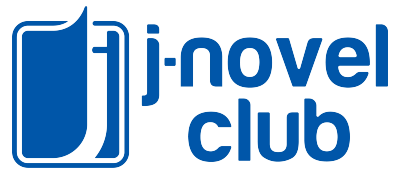
“Where’s the poetryyy?! (kick)”

Yoshinobu Akita, September 1997









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